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BY
J. G. GREENHOUGH



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BRUNSWICK STREET, STAMFORD STREET, S.E.,
AND BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I	
ABRAHAM	
A PIONEER OF FAITH	I
II	
ABRAHAM AND LOT	
LIVES WHICH GREW APART	9
III	
JACOB AND ESAU	
A SUICIDAL BARGAIN	18
IV	
JACOB	
THE HEAVENLY LADDER	26
V	
JOSEPH	
A DREAMER WHOSE DREAMS CAME TRUE	34
VI	
MOSES	
THE CALL AND EQUIPMENT OF A LEADER	42
VII	
CALEB AND JOSHUA	
THE CONFIDENCE WHICH WINS	50
VIII	
MOSES	
A GREAT LIFE UNFINISHED	57

CONTENTS

	PAGE
IX	
JOSHUA	
HERO, BY APPOINTMENT	65
X	
JOSHUA	
THOROUGHNESS AND DECISION	73
XI	
SAMSON	
UNCONSCIOUS DEGENERATION	81
XII	
MICAH	
THE IMAGE MAKER—SACERDOTALISM OLD AND NEW	88
XIII	
SAMUEL	
THE TRAINING OF A PROPHET	96
XIV	
DAVID AND ABSALOM	
A FATHER'S REMORSE AND A FATHER'S FORGIVENESS	105
XV	
DAVID	
THE REAL GREATNESS OF MAN	112
XVI	
DAVID	
MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD	120
XVII	
HADAD	
PATRIOTISM	128
XVIII	
ELIJAH	
THE PROPHET WHO LEARNED A LESSON OF FAITH FROM A HEATHEN WOMAN	136

CONTENTS

vii

	PAGE
NAAMAN	XIX
THE "BUTS" OF LIFE	144
NAAMAN AND ELISHA	XX
THE NEEDS WHICH LEVEL ALL	152
ELISHA	XXI
THE ENCOMPASSING DEFENCE OF THE FAITHFUL	160
DAVID	XXII
THE SAVING POWER OF A TEMPTED LIFE	168
DAVID	XXIII
PRAYER FOR LIGHT AND GUIDANCE	177
JEREMIAH	XXIV
REVERENCE FOR THE OLD THINGS	186
JEHOIAKIM	XXV
A FOOL AND HIS PENKNIFE	194
MICAH	XXVI
A PROPHET'S PESSIMISM	202
MICAH	XXVII
AN OLD PICTURE OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS	210



I

ABRAHAM

A PIONEER OF FAITH

Gen. xii. 5 : "And they went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came."

IN reading these words you would never suppose that they refer to anything extraordinary or important. You would imagine that they describe a quite commonplace incident. There are no notes of exclamation, or rhetorical flourishes. They are brevity and simplicity in perfection. The Bible does not chronicle its great events in newspaper fashion, with enormous type and startling headlines. Nor does God give notice of their coming with signs in the heavens or a blaze of fireworks on earth. The greatest changes and revolutions begin as silently as the dropping of a seed grain in the soil or the shooting of a beam of light into the darkness. Abraham takes a journey; a child is born in a manger; something has happened which will slowly change the face of the world, and the world is blindly unconscious of it, and only finds out after a hundred, or perhaps a thousand, years that anything out of the ordinary has taken place. Momentous indeed and far-reaching in its consequences was the exodus which is here recorded without any parade or emphasis at all. Out of it grew the Jewish nation and all the witness which they bore for God through two thousand years. Out of it came the one comparatively pure and spiritual

religion which the world had during that long period, and out of it indirectly came the fuller Christian light in which we walk, and which is destined to illumine all nations. Nothing which has ever been done, except the coming into the world of Jesus, can be compared with this for the magnitude and extent of its results. "They went forth to go into the land of Canaan;" that is the beginning, and then there is a leap of more than four hundred years before the end is realised—"and into the land of Canaan they came."

There are no particulars of the journey given, and no preliminaries. The beginnings of this epoch-making life are hidden from us like some great river which fertilises a continent and springs from some unknown source in the mountains. How Abraham grew and took shape and rose above his moral surroundings we cannot tell. There is no law of inheritance for great souls. They are not their fathers' sons or the product of their age. They are the children of the Almighty, God's miraculous creations. We know nothing of his childhood and youth save that he had been trained in idolatrous beliefs and practices; in the worship of sun, moon, stars, and manifold strange gods; in dark and cruel customs and human sacrifices. All his friends and kindred, father, and mother were held fast bound in these dreary superstitions, and through all the years of his early manhood these heavy chains were upon him. Then slowly, no doubt, the light of a higher truth broke upon his darkness. A sense of weariness and dissatisfaction oppressed him, and a conviction laid hold of him that this hideous heathen system was a fabric of lies; that he and all those about him had been walking in a vain show. At last the voice said to him that he must cast it off though it was like a

rending of the flesh, get away from it though it was like cutting asunder all the supports of life; that he must go out though he went to loneliness, friendlessness, peril, and death. Better lose everything than quench the light which was in him; better face all possible foes than be false to his better self and disobedient to the heavenly vision. So away he departed from home and fatherland, and from all that he had loved, to wander in the great unknown, hated by those he had left behind, a suspected stranger among those whom he met elsewhere, lonely and apparently unblessed. They went forth to go unto the land which God would show them. And now from this story we are taught some of the most beautiful lessons of faith.

I

That God's unknown way leads to God's Canaan. In this case indeed it was a way all unknown, the path of a blind man. He went out, not knowing whither. God knew, but to the man it was just a plunge into the darkness. He could not guess what things were waiting for him. The promises were given to him, one by one, after he had taken the decisive step. At the start there was nothing written on his marching order but the bare words, "Get thee out, obey this voice." God filled the blanks with golden lines as he went along. There were none to cheer him at the outset. All that he knew was that God had some unforeseen purpose, and that the way in which he was to go was God's way, the way of duty, the way of conscience, and the way of righteousness. He followed the higher bidding, asking no

questions. Yet greater and richer than all human foresight could have guessed were the results and rewards. Better than all material treasures, and more glorious than all earthly crowns, were the moral and spiritual honours and gains which accrued from this child-like trust. Obedience made him a prince of humanity, a heaven-appointed leader, a father of many nations, a blessing to countless generations, a name that will shine as the stars for ever. Truly God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth, and infinitely better are God's purposes with a man than the man could devise for himself. We are all led like Abraham if we have the same spirit of obedience and duty. The journey of faith is for all of us a journey into an unknown land. God has some Canaan in view for us, but we cannot see it. We can never guess the consequences, the rewards, the end to which dutiful faith will lead us. The Divine voice says, "Do this duty, take this step, pursue that path, follow the light," and He who gives the order knows whither, but we do not; and when we ask "Let us see the end," we get for answer only this, "What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." All the men who have done great and good things in the world have gone out like Abraham in the dark. They have not foreseen the greatness at all, or even striven for it. The Apostles knew not that they were to be the founders of a spiritual kingdom. Paul did not foresee that he would become the great interpreter of Christian thought to the world. Luther and Wesley did not anticipate that they would be the leaders of great religious revolutions; they had no vast projects and ambitions; they simply obeyed each day the Divine

orders which were given them, took each day the way of prayer, of righteousness, of duty, content if they had light enough for that and the next step, and leaving to a higher will all that should come after. And God charged Himself with their destiny, took the shaping of their lives and work into His own hands, led them to a very Canaan of distinguished service and splendid influence and power, and surprised the world by the greatness to which He had raised them. "None mount so high as those who know not whither they are going," said Cromwell, and what is true of great souls is more or less true of all. It is the man who is content to be led by God rather than the man who plans and carves and forces his way without regard to God who is brought forth at last into the happier and nobler places of life. It is the man who uses the simple weapon of obedience, that is, obedience to the calls of duty, to the word of God, to the inner voice and light which the Divine Spirit has given, to the principles of rectitude and the inspirations of prayer; it is this man who is helped through all the difficulties of life, and lifted over its formidable mountains, and guided through all its dark places and brought out into a land of peace and honourable reward. Do what God bids you every day, do it in your homes, do it in your business, do it in all your religious and public work. Do not deviate from the path which He plainly marks out, do not shirk the appointed thing because it is unwelcome, do not choose some other course because you are afraid of the immediate consequences, do not imagine that a dishonest or doubtful action of any kind will smooth your path and save you from untoward results. It will only defer them a little and make them more terrible when they come. We

have really little to do with consequences. If we are bent on shaping them, they will always delude and mock us. What we have to do is with the ways and methods. If we keep these straight according to God's line, He will see to the results. It is the business with which He has charged Himself, and He never disappoints in the end those who trust Him.

Young people ask—"What shall I have if I follow God, if I take up openly and heartily the religious life, if I give myself to what is called the service of Jesus?" They say it means sacrificing much, bidding farewell to certain pleasant habits and agreeable desires, expending time which they would like to employ in more entertaining or more profitable ways, and perhaps wrenching themselves from companionships which they are loth to part with. And they do not like the prospect, they shrink from the near consequences. What compensation will it bring? they say; what guerdon will they have further on? We cannot tell them; God only knows. In what way the reward will come in this life or in the life hereafter is hidden in His counsels. But no man who has ever taken that course has found God a deceiver, or has failed to reach results that were worth all the sacrifice. The one question for us is—Is it God's way; does He require me to take it? He will see that the end of it is some exceeding great reward, more of real peace and prosperity, honour, and blessedness in this life than any which our own impulses and unaided wisdom would attain, and in the world to come life eternal.

And if some of the older ones are treading a path of sorrow, if their steps are taken in thick darkness, if in the present moment heavy burdens are weighing

upon them and the immediate future promises no relief, still the only question which they need ask is—Is this the way into which the Divine hand has led us: have we been brought into it, not by our own follies and sins, but by events of which He has had the shaping: and are we walking through it with prayers on our lips and simple trust in our heart? Then they can wait with patience and with hope. Out of this evil God's good will come, and at the end of this way is some bright Canaan of reward.

“They went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.” They themselves came and possessed the land in faith, and their children after them came and possessed the land in reality.

II

The end of faith's journey is certified by the power which ordered it. The promise was to him and to his children, and it was all fulfilled. It was more than four hundred years from the beginning of the journey to its end. Interminable delays, obstacles apparently insuperable, long slavery in Egypt, oppression by many Pharaohs, bondage which nearly broke the nation's heart, chariots and horsemen to keep them chained and block the way, seas and deserts, mountains and rivers to cross, Moabites and Amalekites, giants, and fortresses to bar their course, fears within and fightings without. But the one Divine purpose stood fast: nothing could shake or turn it. The end which God foresaw and designed when He sent this man and his scanty band forth on their dark venturesome journey was the end to which, with irresistible might, He brought their children after

the toils and waitings of centuries. "They went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came." Brethren, the same unchangeable purpose is over us and over all them that seek to do His will. All other things are but clay compared with that fixed and determined thought of His which never swerves or falters or fails. The future of the Church, the future of Christ's Kingdom is known and made absolutely certain by Him who sent it forth into the world's darkness and sin. And men can no more stop the stars in their revolutions, or change the order of the seasons, or sweep back the inrushing tide of the sea, than prevent the forward movements of Christ's power through the masses of humanity.

And nothing can prevent the rewards which He has prepared for those who serve Him, for those who are set on doing His will. Our own perverse ways, our repeated falls, our murmuring rebellions would be enough to turn Him from us, if anything human could turn Him. But His love and forgiveness are like His purpose, unwearying and everlasting. The blessed end comes inevitably to those who bind themselves by faith to Him and make His way their daily choice. The richest happiness in this life is reached by those who love and obey Him. What seems to contradict that is but a brief delay. Nothing can stop the destined order. Verily it shall be well with God's servants even here, and far better, unspeakably better, hereafter. "They went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came."

II

ABRAHAM AND LOT

LIVES WHICH GREW APART

Gen. xiii. 11 and 12: "And they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the Cities of the Plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom."

THESE men seem a long way off. There is a gulf four thousand years wide between them and ourselves, and an almost greater distance in matters of race, speech, dress, occupations, modes of thought, and habits of life; yet human nature is the same, whether it belongs to hoary antiquity, or to our brand new civilisation. And the men of the Bible are always intensely human. They are not stiff, starched, dressed-up figures of the stage, or impossible creations of romance. They are men and women the like of which we can find at any moment by stripping off the modern surface from our own lives and the lives of our neighbours. These stories always come home to us with a personal application if we know how to read them.

Lot especially has his modern representatives in every religious gathering, as well as in gatherings which are not very religious. Abram is of a type not so common, yet he also is among us as a sweet savour in every church, and as the salt of the earth. Lot holds on to religion with the least bit of heart, sometimes hardly more than with the tip of his

fingers; yet for the sake of that bit God bears with him, and teaches us also to bear, with the charity that hopeth all things and endureth all things; whilst Abram is the man who has to bear with us; he is so much nearer God and so much greater in faith.

I.—THE GOOD START

The first point we have to notice is, that these two men started together. We might almost liken them to two flowers on the same stem, which grow together for awhile, but one has a worm hidden in the heart of it, and it presently withers and drops its blackened leaves into the dust, while the other reaches on to brighter bloom and sweeter perfume.

The beginning of Lot's story runs side by side with that of Abram. They leave their fatherland and home as companions and fellow-pilgrims in the great search for a better country and a nobler life.

The older man has got weary of the idolatrous and immoral doings of his kindred. He has heard a higher voice and seen the glimmerings of a higher light, and he has resolved to forsake all things and follow that light whithersoever it shall lead him. The younger man yields to the same impulse, and says, "Where thou goest I will go, and thy God shall be my God." And so they had journeyed forth together into the great unknown. This man Lot had evidently commenced well and beautifully. He had been full of ideals and aspirations with much of the courage that attempts great things, and the enthusiasm that can suffer and dare. His was the sort of youth which carries in its face the promise of high achievements. But the promise was not fulfilled,

the glow of youthful ardour seems quickly to have passed away. The ideals were left behind and forgotten as he passed along. He is a plain, somewhat coarse, and very matter-of-fact man when he appears before us in the scene of our text. There is no romance about him now, and very little faith. Some heroism is in the grain lying deep, and the rubbing of the world only brings it out; and some is like the gauze on the butterfly's wings, it needs only the touch of a rough hand to sweep it off. Lot's was of this latter kind. They had both acquired wealth in their venturesome journey, but not with the same moral results. Lot in getting gold had well-nigh lost God, which is no uncommon thing. Abram had not been ensnared and enslaved by his riches, but had succeeded always in keeping his thoughts above them. Both men are still religious in a way. But the religiousness of the one is intense, strong, uncorrupted—with him it is the principal thing; with the other it is little more than a memory, a relic of better days, a trick or habit which he cannot altogether throw off, though it sits somewhat uneasily upon him. The faith of the one is capable of everything, he would die rather than deny it; the faith of the other would sell itself for no great bribe. The one has the single eye, looking ever forward; the other is equally intent upon the lower chances of life, and the higher thoughts are kept for special occasions. These are the two men as we find them now. Very human, are they not? and modern, too! You would not have to go far to find them; they are in every congregation. Look into your own hearts! there is perhaps something strikingly like one or other of them there.

II.—AT THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

They had journeyed together for years, and now the parting comes. That parting was inevitable. You say it was brought about by a trivial incident. No! it is true that their herdsmen quarrelled; there was not room enough for the two companies with their flocks and herds, and the partnership must be dissolved. That, you say, was the ground of the separation. No! that was only the reason assigned, but behind that lay far deeper and more painful reasons. Lives are not put asunder by such petty causes. Nations do not go to war because their ambassadors have exchanged sharp words. That is only the last straw. Good men do not take a long farewell of each other because their respective servants have been wrangling. That, perhaps, brings things to a crisis if fifty other things have been working in the same direction. The merest spark is sufficient to kindle the fire if the material is ready. And the material was ready here. This separation had been coming long, as it comes to all of us with some of the friendships of our youth. The conviction is slowly forced upon us that we are not and cannot be the same to each other as of old. It begins with a doubt, a misgiving, and presently reaches a certainty that we can no longer walk together. Our souls have grown almost as far apart as if death had divided them. We have no longer any sympathies in common, or hopes and aims and beliefs in common. Our thoughts move in different worlds; our deepest interests lie far asunder. We cannot talk except about the most trivial and superficial things. And then comes the wrench—done with a last shake of the hand, perhaps a final courtesy,

or with no parting sign at all. We simply drift apart by mutual consent, and by-and-bye almost forget each other. But the godlier man of the two feels his whole nature quiver with pain when the sad necessity is forced upon him, and the soul that was like a brother to him goes off, and is lost in the world of strangers. Which of us that has made any distinct moral and spiritual advance has not a tale of this kind to tell? They have gone from us, the pledged companions of our youth with whom we dreamed and prayed together; gone, we hardly know where, but downward, and we are climbing Godward without them. You talk sadly about the partings of life. Yes, there are many partings, and they are all more or less of the tearful kind; but the saddest partings are those which have a moral and religious cause. Some of us forget the friends of other days, simply because wealth and position have come to us, and not to them; and that is sad enough, because it proves that we are made up of coarse fibres, and that with all our fine ways we have not learned to be gentlemen. And some are parted by mental and intellectual barriers. One has grown more thoughtful, cultured, and refined, and the other has remained as he was, or become coarser, and their separation is inevitable, but still sad. And some of us have lost many dear friends by the bitterness of death's parting, and that is always too sad for words during earth's little while. But more grievous than all those are the separations which come between friends—nay, between brothers and sisters—when one chooses the high and noble way of purity and Christly endeavour, and the other loses touch of every precious thing and descends to a life that is vulgar, carnal, sensual, and earthly. No matter how close

akin, there are worlds between these two. This thing had come to Abram—the awful hard necessity. He had seen the glow fade from the young man's spirit, and the scaly rind of worldliness creep over it, and their thoughts and sympathies had got further and further apart, and now there was no outcome but this: “Separate thyself I pray thee from me; if thou wilt take the left hand I will go to the right, or if thou depart to the right hand then I will go to the left.” They were simple, courteous words—but they were the words of a sorrowful and half-bleeding heart, for Abram had loved this young kinsman and fellow-pilgrim, oh! so dearly. And henceforth the two lives moved on each in its own path, hardly to cross one another again.

III.—THE CHOICE WHICH DETERMINED THE REST

Each in his chosen path; for though Abram, with the kindly and unselfish courtesy of God's true gentleman, gave the option to the younger man, and the younger man, in his anxiety to get the better of the bargain, forgot what was due to years, and greedily accepted the offer of first choice, yet they both got exactly what they wished. Those cities of the plain had no attraction for the godlier man. No doubt there were richer pastures and more lucrative markets for the cattle, and the greater social advantages of city life near. But these, with all the horrid foulness and moral corruptions which were associated with them, were poor compensation for the loss of things which he loved far more dearly. There are some men, as Bunyan says, who will sell their souls for a pin, and there are others like Abram who

will not even put them in peril, or let the dust sully their virgin purity, to gain the whole world.

He knew what choice Lot would make. There were straws enough to show which way that stream was flowing. With Lot the main business was to get on; to be near the markets; to secure good positions for his family, and rich young men to marry his daughters. What would become of his religious life and theirs, how their morals would fare in that hell of temptation, was a question which he put aside. Men like Lot, whose religion is on the surface, do not allow these considerations to weigh with them. They must push themselves up and into what is called good society, whatever comes; they must get their children married to property; they must make the best of this world in any case, let what will happen about the next. So Lot set his affections on the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent towards Sodom. There is quite a dramatic touch there. Not in the city, or even near to it, but in the direction of it. He was not prepared to throw in his lot with the men of that city yet. A man cannot go direct from the company of saintly Abram to a bacchanalian crew like that which held its revels there. He slides down to them by an easy, gradual descent. A man clings hard to the remnant of his religion, even when he has allowed the greater part of it to go. He fights for the shell and form of it more than he did for the life and substance. Lot pitched his tent towards Sodom, no doubt making virtuous resolutions that he would never go down to live there. He would only trade with these people, and visit them occasionally, and still hold himself in the main aloof. Alas for these resolutions of men whose hearts are on the down grade! He did not long remain in the

remote outskirts of the city. The huge whirlpool swiftly drew him in. Presently we find him living at the very gates of Sodom—marvellously advanced in position, a man of great consequence, with his daughters married to notable citizens, and sunk down to the level of those citizens, so depraved that their after story is not fit for decent lips; and his whole household has breathed the pestilent moral air of the place, and become diseased. A miserable outcome, surely, of a life that began in a noble journey of faith. With all his getting and gains and advancements he has but a poor show to make of it in the end.

And so the two men made their choice, as men and women are making it every day; the great thing with the one is to keep his faith uncorrupted, his soul pure, his life honest and noble. Win or lose he will not trample on his early vows and forfeit the one thing which makes life worth living, and he goes on until he comes to be the father of the faithful and the friend of God. With the other, the great thing is to make his way in the world—decently, if he can; and if that is not possible, to make his way anyhow; and he goes on and down until at last he has to be saved “so as by fire,” and only the infinite mercy of God would have thought him worth saving.

It is unspeakably sad to see this spirit creeping over ourselves and others, to see lives that commenced beautifully, like Lot’s, sinking down and down, the eye gradually lowering its aims, the soul hovering like a moth around the world’s glaring lights, until it is drawn in, and all its better thoughts consumed. We are all exposed to the temptation and the danger of it. We need everlasting prayer and watchfulness to secure ourselves against it. We

need often to remind ourselves of the Divine, all-suffering love which redeemed us from the world at a great price, which is always holding on to us, however weak and unworthy we are. We need to renew our vows at the feet of the blessed Master, to Whom we first spoke them long ago, and to say to Him in earnest entreaty, "Suffer us not, for any of the world's seductions or the very pains of death, to fall from Thee."

III

JACOB AND ESAU

A SUICIDAL BARGAIN

Gen. xxv. 31-34: "Sell me thy birthright. Thus Esau despised his birthright."

THIS is a story which we can never forget. Once read, it remains with us as if branded with hot iron on the mind. Esau's birthright and how he disposed of it; every one remembers that with wonder and pity, and perhaps with anger and disgust. There is nothing pleasing in the incident. Every feature of it is ugly and disgraceful. It is told not to point us the way, but to warn us of a danger.

Each of these brothers shows a pitiable figure in the transaction. If the sacred writer only expressly condemns one, he leaves us in no doubt what he thought about the other. The man who tempts is at least as wicked as the man who yields to the temptation—generally the viler of the two. Jacob had a heart of stone and the cunning of the serpent when he refused to give his twin brother a morsel of food save at that costly price, and our wrath flames up against him instinctively; the writer has no need to blow upon it. But for the other man we feel contempt as well as wrath, who to satisfy a momentary desire or need was willing to sell the most precious thing he had. In modern times the birthright is often a thing of immense value. In noble houses it

carries with it the title and the estates. In those ancient times it meant far more. It made its possessor the recognised head of the household, the head of the tribe or clan, its religious head, its prophet, priest, and king. It was more than ownership. It was a title to nobility, a sacred function, an appointment and election of God. It was pre-eminently a religious thing. And this man sold it because he was hungry and the savoury steam of that soup tempted him. The birthright would only be of value in the future. He could not enjoy its privileges until his father was dead, and that might be years hence. The basin of delicious food was available at this moment. He could gratify his present appetite without delay. So he greedily clenched the bargain and swore to it, bartering his name, honour, and inheritance, his religious right, and his very God for a carnal feast which would be over in a few minutes. "Thus Esau despised his birthright."

I

Now we have heard people say that the story is hardly believable, that it must be a pious fable, for no sane man would ever have done such a supremely absurd and babyish thing. I can believe it readily enough, not merely because it is in the Bible, but because it is so much like things which happen to-day. You could hardly read a newspaper through without finding a modern version of the story. These two brothers died some four thousand years ago, but types of character which they represent have never passed away. You might see their faces now in almost any crowd of people. Jacob is found in every class,

standing at every street corner, crying out to them that pass by, "Sell me thy birthright." He is shrewd, cunning, selfish, and audacious. He thinks that every one and everything can be bought if you will only pay the price for it. He takes advantage of human hunger, need, appetite, passion, and ambition, offering food for that particular craving in return for some sacrifice of honour or conscience. You meet with him in a hundred forms in the business world. To the starving sempstress he says, "Here is bare food if you will sell me all your days and half your nights"; to the man who has to meet a bill he says, "Sell me those goods at half their value and you shall have what you require"; to the clerk or shopman in search of employment he says, "I will find you a place if you are not overburdened with scruples"; to the buyer he says, "Give me a big line, sell your master's interests, and I will make it right with you." He is found in the matrimonial world saying, "Sell your soul and body to one whom you cannot love, and I will make you a fine lady." He is in the political world offering various bribes to those who will sell their convictions, and you find him even in the religious world, especially in villages, saying, "Sell your faith, conscience, honesty, sell your freedom, sell your nonconformity, and I will give you custom, social privileges, and everything which the carnal mind desires." You never go far in life without coming across some Jacob who is waiting for you with his mess of pottage, ready prepared according to your taste, and offering to give you the whole of it and a great deal more if you will part with your honour or your purity or your conscience; if you will sell your integrity, your Christian ideals, your birthright and your very soul and God.

Beware of him ! His smooth, cunning, treacherous face is everywhere ; and if you yield to him and sell what no money can buy back, you will find no place of repentance though you seek it carefully with tears.

II

And Esau, I think, has even more numerous successors than Jacob. You find them at school among boys and girls. They abound in the ranks of young men. There are crowds of them walking in the streets every night, lurking about the drinking shops, filling the places of amusement, streaming up to the race-course, by-and-bye swelling the ranks of the unemployed, drifting down to join the wastrels and the ne'er-do-wells, darkening and blighting many a home, bringing father and mother with sorrow to the grave, and perhaps finishing their course in a criminal's cell, or a pauper's uniform, or a drunkard's grave. Your real Esau never thinks of the future. Sufficient unto the day is the pleasure and the evil thereof. That which might be is of no weight compared with the mess of pottage which is. The delight of the passing hour is of more value than all the possibilities of coming years. He has no patience to wait for the hope deferred. He only cares to swallow the savoury morsel which is spread before his eyes. He does as little work as he can help, and never fits himself for better work. He spends all he has, finding it always too little, and never spends it in a wise way. He marries without the least preparation as soon as he can find a woman as foolish as himself. He has no prudence, foresight, or self-restraint. He indulges every appetite without a thought of what it

will cost him. He lives for the day as if there were no morrow. He yields to every temptation and gratifies every desire without a thought of what the end of it all will be. His cry is always, "Give me that mess of pottage. I must have it at once; no matter about the cost; there will be time for that afterwards." There are Esaus among the poor, ignorant, intemperate, and degraded who have never known anything better, who have never been trained in any other way. We pity them, we half weep for them, we are too sorrowful to be angry. There are also Esaus among the well-educated and even gifted, who have been brought up in sober, well-ordered, religious homes, given a good start in life, and well equipped for the race so far as care and expenditure could do it. They are sons of men who have held their heads erect, and lived honourably and gained perhaps a noble reputation. These Esaus go out into the world with a precious birthright, carrying a trusted name, perhaps with a career ready made for them, with an inheritance of moral and religious thoughts, and with fair and even splendid chances. They sell their birthright, not all at once, but bit by bit, until there is nothing left of it. They sell their own good name and their fathers' and their mothers' trust, and all their goodly inheritance of mental and moral qualities, and all their powers of service, and all their best chances. And they barter all this away for hours of intoxication, swift days of self-indulgence, moments of licentious gratification, things worth no more than that mess of pottage. These are the Esaus who make good men angry. Over them surely the angels weep. For them we can well believe there is a fearful looking for of judgment.

III

We are all, in fact, buying and selling as those two brothers were. Some, thank God, are buying what they will keep for ever, what will be a blessing to them for ever. They are buying self-mastery, they are buying a sweet and lovely name, religious habits of thought, a conscience void of offence, fitness for service; they are buying the love of good men and the favour and reward of God. But all that has to be bought at a costly price, at the sacrifice of many a desire, many an hour of ease, and by the expenditure of effort and prayer. And some are selling the very gold of their hearts for painted baubles and gilded mud. They are selling their purity and manhood, their health of mind and vigour of body, selling their very souls for coarse delights which swine might enjoy, but which men formed in the image of God should loathe and trample down. Young men and women, what are you doing in the great market of life? What are you selling, and what are you buying? The Lord have mercy upon you, though you deserve no mercy, if you are selling as Esau sold.

IV

We have all one birthright, which we should keep as long as life lasts. Better let life itself go than that. We were sent into the world with a religious faculty, with a consciousness of God, with the germs of reverence, worship, and faith, with an immortal soul and the powers of an endless life, with the possibilities of larger and better things. We were born children of God, marked out as heirs of eternal life,

each one carrying in his school satchel a title deed to God's favour and to heaven, each one bearing the marks of that blood which was shed to redeem, each one an object of Divine compassion, each one a soul for whom Christ died. We all come into the world with some belief in goodness, and some hope that we may attain it, with a feeling that we are far nearer akin to angels and to God than we are to beasts. And all this we retain more or less through childhood, through our teens and into early manhood and womanhood. We keep it until we have bartered it away or flung it away in follies, sins, shameful indulgences, and blind neglects. Oh, it is a wonderful birthright! This power of believing in God and loving Him, this kinship with Christ which He allows and claims, this possibility of climbing up the ladder of faith until we reach the stature of Christ and see God's face, this capacity by which we receive grace and strength from above, this chance which is given to all of us of growing into a large, sweet, beautiful, serviceable life on earth, and then joining the ranks of those who have been crowned! Who would sell that birthright for anything which the Jacobs of the world can offer? In all your sober moments you declare, "Not I, no, not I; I will keep it whatever it costs to keep it. No gold shall buy it from me. I will not sell it for all the lusts and prides of the world. Tortures should not wring it from me. I would hold it fast though death were tearing it from my hands." So you speak in your sane moods. So we ought to speak. And yet thousands are selling it, selling it for money, selling it for the excitements of the gambling booth, selling it for drink or the pleasures of the streets, selling it for the companionship of evil men or the lures of evil women, selling

it for the bravos of those who sneer at religion, selling it for days of ease and nights of revelry, selling it for a few draughts of the devil's wine cup, selling it for a pin, selling it for nothing at all. May God save us all from Esau's madness. God help us to hold fast our birthright of immortal hope and dignity, our share in Christ's redemption, our part in God's election, our name written in the Book of Life, our fair sweet chance of noble service here and of the higher service beyond.

Be not among the Jacobs who buy others into sin, nor among the Esaus who sell themselves for a mess of pottage.

Be of those who buy the truth and sell it not, and in buying the truth have laid up for themselves an eternal crown.

IV

JACOB

THE HEAVENLY LADDER

Gen. xxviii. 12 : "And he dreamed a dream, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven ; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it."

THIS was only a young man's dream, and most people laugh at dreams and at those who dream them. When one of Shakespeare's cynical personages wishes to emphasise the utter emptiness of human life, he says, "We are such stuff as dreams are made of." And other poets have advised us to act, and not waste our lives in dreaming. And yet he who never dreams is never fully awake to the greater realities of life. Ambitions are dreams. And young love is partly a dream. Aspirations are dreams, and all sighings for a better life. Every hope which paints our sky and gives spring to our feet is more or less a dream, and every prayer we offer to God. They are all dreams. Yet how flat and stagnant would life be without them ! Youth would be as dull as dreary old age if it had no dreams. And even old age would be fifty times more weary if all its dreams were gone. Do not laugh at dreams then, but be thankful that you have them, and especially if they have any resemblance to the dream which is described here. For this dream was indeed beautiful—far too beautiful for a human

brain to shape. It was painted on that sleeper's mind by God, as all our best dreams are. And the first thing that we learn here is—

I

That very ordinary, and even vulgar, souls have good and noble dreams. You would hardly have expected a vision of this kind coming to a young man of Jacob's type and character. Far more likely that he would dream of a ladder with a bag of gold at the top, or of a competition in which cleverness and cunning would get him the victory. His ambitions had not been of the heavenly kind so far. They had had a most decided and distinct earthly flavour. He had just been outwitting his brother, tricking his father, and acquiring birthrights and blessings by guile, and was now going forth to practise his clever hand in a wider world. And here he lies down and dreams of God and heaven and angels. Impossible, you say; incredible, utterly inconsistent! But you know very little of human nature or of your own nature if you say that. You forget that it is always a mixed composition, and sometimes a bundle of contradictions. The worst men have occasionally passing visions of better things, and pure dreams come to the least saintly and the most worldly of us. Am I never to credit you with longings for a noble life because most of your desires run on the lower level? May you not touch heaven to-day, even though yesterday your thoughts were all roped down among the muck of earthly matters? I should not like to say of the most giddy, frivolous, sport-loving, and godless young people in this town that their souls never get above that mud and froth and coarseness.

It would not be true. We have all our lucid moments, however great the folly and insanity of our ordinary hours. We are all made double, with a good deal of the animal and something that spurns the animal and rises above it. We were made of clay, yet made in God's image, with some of His jewelled thoughts dropped in. Yes, amid all that is common and sordid in us there are gleams of divine and eternal things. For hours and days together we may not have a thought or aspiration which would be fit to put into a prayer, or fit to be written in a book, and then there are moments when the soul within us speaks and the sleeping divinity awakes, and we feel that a good and beautiful life would not be impossible to us. There are times when God's light shines through the dullest mortal tenement and makes its walls shine like a palace of jasper. In every life there are great moments when God comes near and heaven is laid open. In all of us there is the diviner part, which awakes when the coarser self has gone to sleep, which awakes, looks up, and catches sight of the higher beings to whom it is akin, which beholds afar off the Father's face, and aspires to climb the stairway which leads up to Him. We all have these visions, and the young have them often. "Behold a ladder, the top of which reached to heaven, and lo ! the angels of God ascending and descending."

II

In this dream we have God's thought of each human life and its possibilities. Charles Darwin and his successors have familiarised us with the doctrine of evolution. They have written about the ascent

of man, tracing his development and rise from the reptile stage to what he is now. Whatever truth there may be in that, I prefer to look upon this divine picture of man's ascent. In that dream we see heaven wedded to earth, and man linked to God. At the foot of the ladder is the coarse, sinful creature called Jacob. At the top is eternal goodness and infinite beauty. They are far apart now, yet they are in unbroken connexion. Human life in one of its lower forms at the bottom; yet related to the highest life of all, and with the staircase of faith and prayer to climb up on and reach Godlikeness. That is the inspiring and hope-breathing doctrine of evolution and the ascent of man. The very incarnation was prefigured in that dream ladder. The great thought which Christ gave to the world; the thought that God and humanity, though far apart, are linked in kinship and in their very nature; linked by a spiritual ladder; so near akin that God could descend the ladder and assume our form; so near akin that man may ascend the ladder until he clasps God and becomes like Him. Jacob saw one of God's great thoughts when he dreamed that dream; the thought which glorifies us all as soon as we can lay hold of it. You are always asking in the days of youth what the ladder of life is going to show to you. Will you mount that ladder as other aspiring souls have done, and what will you find when you reach its higher steps? Is there a place there for your ambitions? Are there crowns and honours, wealth and favour up there for you? We have all of us these dreams in the young romantic days. We see a great many tempting things, and sometimes very coarse and unworthy things, high up on that ladder, and we are fiercely eager to mount up and clutch them. But

the true and noble ascent is that which this dreamer saw—the climb to God's feet and to a rich Christlike manhood. And that is within the reach of every one. No matter how low down on the ladder you are, its steps go all the way up. There is no break; there is no wide gap. You can ascend it by faith, by prayer, by the helping hand of God, by the might of Jesus Christ. Behold a ladder, the top of which reaches heaven, and angels are going up and down.

III

In this dream we have a panoramic view of actual human lives as God sees them, and as we may any day see them ourselves. It is a picture of ascents and descents. It suggests to us human triumphs and human tragedies. It suggests to us both the shameful and the glorious episodes of human life. The world is all a ladder, and everywhere we see the angels going up and coming down. Everywhere we see men made in the image of God, immortal creatures, dropping down to a lower level or slowly mounting. We see that constantly in the common things of life, in the struggle for fortune and social position. The majority of men and women remain for the most part in the condition to which they were born. Yes, the majority; but a considerable number either rise above that condition or fall far below it. Energy and faith push up some, drunkenness and self-indulgence pull down others. One who starts little better than a pauper springs up to a millionaire, and the millionaire or his son finishes his days in the convict's cell or the parish asylum. The School Board boy mounts higher than the pampered darling

of some gilded home, and the young man who has passed through a university is found destitute and dirty in some obscure garret. There are scores of such men in our great cities. Men of whom a nation is proud were nursed in a peasant or pitman's cottage, and men of whom their own mothers are ashamed served their apprenticeship amid all the appliances of wealth and culture. These are everyday facts. It is absurd to say there is no chance to rise now—all the top places are filled. There never was a time when so many of the top places were waiting to be filled; never was a time when perseverance and courage were more sure of promotion. And what is also true, it was never easier to descend than it is now. Young men have both these possibilities before them. We witness just the same rises and falls in moral and religious things. The biographies of the Bible laugh to scorn the popular notion that everything depends on the beginning. Abraham starts low down, grovelling at the feet of idols; he reaches up to be the father of the faithful. Jacob starts a lump of selfishness, and ends a man of prayer with a bit of the saint shining in him. Solomon, Manasseh, and a host of others grow up in praying homes, with a youth as fair as a summer dawn. They pass on to a midday of sickly gloom and an evening time of degradation. Peter and Judas Iscariot begin from about the same moral level. Peter develops into a rock of strength and goodness; Judas degenerates into a traitor and suicide. It does not matter so much on what step of the moral ladder your feet are planted when life's struggles begin; that hardly depends on you at all; it is determined by birthplace, parentage, training, and education. The great thing is, are you going up the ladder or down? Are you

slowly dropping to the lower rungs, or, by the help of God, slowly lifting yourself higher? God measures and judges every one by that. If Jacob has climbed only one step above the coarse base level where he commenced, he is dearer in God's sight than the man who started from the level of an angel and has let himself down a few steps. If your course is upward it is well with you, though you may be low enough yet. And if your course is downward you are a pitiable creature, though you may have some of the virtues of the saint. The saddest sight in the world is not the sight of the degraded multitude, who have always been in that condition, but the sight of those who once talked and lived as if they knew all right and godly things and have fallen into the sinks of impurity and the very cesspools of guilt. It is the fall or the ascent that makes all the difference to God's judgment at least.

Now you ought to know on the whole how it is with yourselves. I should think you do know in your secret hearts whether you belong to the ascending or the descending angels. You can at least guess whether you are nearer to God and Godlike things to-day than you were a year ago, or a great deal further away. Most young people certainly know that; they often know it better than those of riper years. They know whether their thoughts have been coarsened or refined, whether their aims, companionships, tastes, and pursuits have been lowered or raised, and whether they are becoming more religious or losing the bit of religion they had. And that is a question which each one should ask himself at the beginning and close of a day. You often talk about getting on and getting up, in the coarse sense of that word. You are always pitying those who are

pushed back or dropping down in that lower sense again.

But really the great concern should be, are we getting up or slipping down in God's meaning of these terms?

We should all ponder that question. For each one it is momentous, and we can only answer it in the right way on our knees before the mercy seat of God and in the strength of Jesus the Master. May you climb a little higher on the heavenly ladder each day.

V

JOSEPH

A DREAMER WHOSE DREAMS CAME TRUE

Gen. xxxvii. 19: "And they said one to another, behold, this dreamer cometh."

WE do not wonder that Joseph was the favourite son of his father. We may think, and do think, that Jacob made a great mistake in showing his partiality so plainly. A father has no right to show more favour to one child than another, however clever, smart, good, or handsome that child may be. If we cannot look for equal justice all round at a father's feet or a mother's feet, where in this world are we to look for it? An earthly home should be like God's mercy seat, where there is no respect of persons. Yet we do not wonder that Jacob placed this boy first in his affections. If he had been our boy it is very likely that we should have done the same. In fact, as we read the story, Joseph is the only one of those twelve lads who lays hold of our sympathies and really interests us. The others are only like stage accessories; they serve as the padding of the story. At the best they are only commonplace figures, with no particular gifts or qualities, and no character to stamp them on our minds. In Joseph from first to last there is something that fastens our attention. He is never common or vulgar. He seems to walk amid the colours of

romance like his coat of many colours; and his life is all romance, stranger than fiction, though true. It is full of lights and shadows, thrilling incidents and hairbreadth escapes. It has often all the pathos of a tragedy; it has always the magic of a fairy tale; and it has sometimes the sweet morality and elevation of a gospel. It commenced with dreams; wild and absurd dreams they seemed to those who heard them. It passed through stern realities and awful tribulation which put those dreams to flight and indeed reduced them to a dismal mockery. But at last, through the way of patient duty and prayerful trust in God, it realised the dreams, or, if not quite that, something better. And because of all these things, it is a story which has something to say to us all, and it ought to be a very fount of inspiration to the young men and maidens who take in its lessons. Think

I

Of this youth and his dreams. "Behold this dreamer cometh." They said it with a scornful laugh which was half fun and half anger. No doubt his dreams had an element of the ridiculous about them; and to tell them was a piece of silly self-conceit. It must have been peculiarly irritating for those strong, full-grown lads to hear this young sprig talking about the great future which awaited him, and informing them that he had seen in a dream the whole lot of them, father and mother as well, kneeling at his feet and doing him homage; and if they had chaffed him, and even given him a cuff or two, it would have done him no harm, and we could have

forgiven them. In fact, that foolish father, by all the coddling and petting, had made him think that he was already a world's wonder, and had done all that a good father could to stuff him with vanity and spoil him. When he began to dream of sun, moon, and stars doing obeisance to him he had pretty well reached the summit of boyish priggishness and audacity, and I think if an average schoolmaster had heard him discoursing in that fashion, the schoolmaster would have given him something more substantial to dream about. At least, I should, if I had been the schoolmaster.

But that is not all. There was something more than vanity, as the after events proved. He was an ingenuous youth, who told his thoughts honestly, He was a gifted youth, with the fire of genius beginning to burn, and he was a godly youth, with the consciousness that God was calling him to a high and noble life. These brethren did not read him aright. They did not read him at all. There was a real greatness in him which they were too coarse to understand. He moved above their level, in a world of higher thoughts; he had aims and prayers and ambitions which they despised. He saw and felt what they saw and felt not. He had aspirations, and they had none. He looked up, and their eyes were chained to earth; and because of this they first envied and then hated him. "Behold this dreamer cometh." That was all they saw in him—a stupid, puffed-up, useless dreamer. Commonplace people generally begin by despising and sneering at those whom they cannot comprehend. The vulgar practical man has always a very contemptuous opinion of the poet, and the artist, and the dreamer. Dull, wooden, uninspiring, and earth-chained men, whose

pursuits are all after the selfish and lower things, feel nothing but pity or derision for the enthusiast, philanthropist, missionary, and apostle. The man who is clever at making money, and thinks there is no other cleverness worth a grain of salt, regards the man who is above money as a sort of fool or maniac. There has never been a great and gifted man in the world yet, never a man who has struck out for higher things, but the people around him snubbed and condemned him as a dreamer; and you, if you set your thoughts above the thoughts of the crowd about you, will be greeted with some such criticism as that. If a young man goes boldly and earnestly into the Christian life, and flings all his spare time and energies into Christian work, he is sure to be laughed at and pitied by all the young gentry of the lighter and lewder sort, whose aspirations never get above the world of sports. What a fool he is, they say, to miss all the jolly things of life for a praying fad like that! "Behold this dreamer cometh." O, yes; the eleven brethren were but a type of the general run of men. Joseph was nothing but a dreamer because he set his affections on higher things and was fired by ambitions which to them had no meaning. It is good that youth should have dreams, bright, brave visions of the future; visions of something better than pleasure, better than wealth, better than an easy life; visions of a good, true, serviceable manhood. Better to have foolish visions than none at all. Better to be ambitious in any way than to have no ambitions. Aim high! Far better to aim at the stars than to aim at nothing, for if you do not quite hit the stars you will shoot a great deal higher than if you always aim at the dust heap at your feet and never get above it.

Joseph dreams! That is a good thing so far.

But many things are to happen before his dreams come to pass. We have seen him in dreamland; let us follow him into that rough world where dreams, if they are only dreams, melt away, and only real grit and faith can stand.

II

The dreamer in life's hard work and warfare. Terrible work it was, too, and grim warfare. Apparently he had imagined that the world was waiting at his feet, and that he was going to have an easy royal march to its crowns and honours. He had a sudden and rude awakening. Most people get that rough awakening who start out with a great conceit of their own abilities, who fancy that they are going to carry all before them and mount the hill of Parnassus with a few hasty strides. However clever you are, you have got to work slowly up, with many a tumble, yes, and many a knock-down blow. And if your ambition cannot bear these things, well, so much the worse for your ambition. It will be like the chaff which the wind bloweth away. Joseph had talked as if no place was too big for him, as if he was already cut out for kingship, and that anything less than that was quite beneath his dignity. And God sent him to a very hard school to be taught humility and a few other elementary lessons. Instead of mounting up on wings, he is thrust down into a very low place indeed. It is at the bottom of the ladder; nay, it is almost the bottom of an abyss. He finds himself a slave, a piece of human property bought and sold, a kitchen drudge, and then a lady's page, and that lady as cruel as she was false; and then a

prisoner, thrust into prison on a false charge and kept there with little hope of release, forgotten as it appeared by everybody. A dreadful ordeal that! Jacob would sooner have buried his boy than sent him into that suffering and hardship. But Joseph tells us later on that it was God who sent him there. God loved the youth better than his father, and sent him to the best school. It took away his foolish self-conceit. It skimmed off the froth of vanity, and left the more substantial stuff. It brought out the qualities of strength, endurance, pluck, courage, and faith which would have perished in a world of caresses and self-indulgence. His father would have made him a milksop. This discipline made him a man. He could not really rise before, because his wings were clogged with honey. Now that they are set free he strikes steadily, though painfully, upward.

III

And this brings us to the last scene—the dreamer dreaming no more, and yet fulfilling his dreams by patient, painstaking, dutiful work. There was the right stuff in him, the stuff which hardship cannot kill. That which would crush the feebler souls calls out the slumbering giant in nobler ones. It is probable that nine young men in ten, tumbled down into that very wretched and unpromising place, would have given the thing up, lost heart, courage, and every incentive, and remained throughout just where and as they had fallen. Joseph shakes himself from the dust and says, “I must play the man now. I have only been a mooning, dreaming youth so far. There must be no more of that. I am only a slave, it is

true. Well, whether slave or freeman, I must act like a king, doing all the lowly services with a willing heart and to the best of my powers." And that is just what he does in Potiphar's house and in the prison. He wins his way slowly into notice by his diligence, obedience, and fidelity to every trust. He never forgets that God sees him in Egypt as He saw him in the land of Canaan; that the watchful eyes are upon him in the prison as they were in his father's house. He keeps himself pure. He does his duty; he works hard; he serves cheerfully everybody about him. His fellow-prisoners look up to him. He wins respect; he commands trust. Promotion comes to him; it cannot be kept back. Masters find that whatever they give him to do will be well done. He is not only clever, but, better still, he is plodding and faithful, and they call him up higher and still higher until he is next to Pharaoh. He has been faithful in a few things, and he is made ruler over many things. And so, in God's strange way, and not in the easier foolish way in which he had imagined, the dreams of his youth are realised.

It is just the old, old story which is told afresh in every life that is well lived, and that rises to a position of great usefulness. You are not going to win the battle of life because you fancy that you have extraordinary gifts, or because you think you are going to be exceptionally lucky. The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Still less are its prizes won in some lottery of luck. It is won by those who can bear burdens without flinching, who can get up again with a hopeful face after every fall, and who, however lowly their lot may be, put their hearts into the work and make the best of it. If you do humble work in a slovenly and indolent way, because you

think it is not good enough for you, you will never get any better work to do. We can do all things with the spirit of a king, and that is the right and only way of becoming kingly and getting promotion. Get to feel, as Joseph did, that God is your Master, and that He will pay well at last if no others do. Pray to Him for guidance, look to Him for light, ask Him for daily strength. Try to live in all things as if you felt that He was looking on. "Commit your way unto Him, and He will bring it to pass. Trust also in Him, and that trust will at last win you every trust, and He will give you the desire of your heart." It is all very well to dream as Joseph did, but it is much better to pray and work; for only in that way are dreams made facts. And that is what this story teaches us all.

VI

MOSES

THE CALL AND EQUIPMENT OF A LEADER

Exod. iv. 2 : "And the Lord said unto him, what is that in thine hand? And he said, a rod."

WE are told in this chapter how the greatest of the prophets was called to the service of God. We are told how a slumbering soul was awakened and energised and sent forth full of the might of faith to do the work of God. It is a wonderful story throughout, and perhaps most wonderful because the call came to a man whose years were full, and whose life's work seemed to be well-nigh done. God usually summons men to His service in the prime of life or in youth, as Christ summoned His disciples, when their strength is at its best and the flame of enthusiasm ready to mount high. But this man received the call at a time when men in the ordinary course of things are waiting for the last call. He had given up all thought of ever doing any great thing with his life. Most of it had been employed in the commonest labour, in the monotonous work of keeping sheep, far away from the cities and haunts of men, where thought is stirred and activities find their inspiration. He had gone mentally to sleep; his years had run to waste; and now it was evening time and the dark not far off, as any one would have said. He might well ask what use God could make of him. He was like a worn-out sword, which might have done

good service if it had been wielded in the Lord's battle long time ago; but now the rust was gathered upon it and its edge was blunt. "Choose some other weapon," said Moses, "new and strong." And God answered, "No; I will use thee. The old man's trembling hands shall become like a giant's, and his failing mind fresh and receptive as a youth's, when I put My Spirit in him." It was the moral, physical, and spiritual re-creation of an old man. That is what gives to the call its unique character. It speaks first to those who think they have got too far on in life to begin again, too far on to attempt either the Christian life or Christian work, and it tells them that faith and the love of God can yet make all things new for them, and all the remaining years like one rich, glad song. But I merely say that in passing, for the main lessons of the story are for the morning and vigour of life. The point which is emphasised here and throughout the two chapters is the sense of unfitness which Moses pleaded. Again and again he urged that his position and disposition and endowments utterly disqualified him for the service. Indeed, he refused to admit that he had any endowments at all. He was not even a man with one talent. The smallest copper coin better expressed his estimate of himself. "Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh and persuade him or force him to let the people go? A man should be a born orator, a skilled soldier, a natural leader of men, to undertake such a work as this, and I am none of these things. I have no eloquence, no training in war, no wide experience of men. I have lived a solitary shepherd's life. I cannot speak to kings or marshal armies, or thrill and persuade a crowd by burning and impassioned words. I am fit for nothing but feeding sheep." So

44 CALL AND EQUIPMENT OF A LEADER

he spoke. And then God answered him as we read here—"What is that in thine hand? And he said a rod." Just an ordinary shepherd's staff. Very well; cast it on the ground. Lo! at God's order and at God's touch that simple homely staff became a serpent, a terrible thing from which Moses fled, and at another word of God it went back to its natural shape again, and the meaning was plain. There is thy sword and the instrument of thy work. Even if thou hast no other weapon or endowment than that God will make that sufficient. He can use mightily the weakest and most despised thing. Take that in thine hand and go forth, and the Lord will work miracles through it and thee. Thy shepherd's staff shall awe kings, and drive back armies, and divide rivers and seas. And thy simple faith shall make thee wise and great and irresistible. Thou shalt confound all the wise men of Egypt. Thou shalt baffle all Pharaoh's host. By this shalt thou lead the children of Israel out of bondage. Now all that is beautiful, and comes home to us though we live not in an age of miracles.

I

There is this thought first, that men only find out their powers, in God's service at least, by endeavouring to do what He bids them. They discover what they can do by yielding themselves up to Him in obedience. This poor timid shepherd, who had been modestly and shamefacedly hiding his light for forty years and more, was really a great man. He had ten talents, and more than that. Apart from his prophetic inspiration he had the force of genius in

him, the mind of the original thinker, the mind of the political leader and statesman. But all this was in him like the slumbering fires of an apparently extinct volcano, choked down. All those years he had been like some spiritual Rip Van Winkle, sluggishly asleep on the sheep mountains, and utterly unconscious of the dormant forces. He never would have found them out, and the world would never have known them if he had refused this call of God. They were awakened, they were like things quickened from the dead when he boldly took in hand God's work and fearlessly advanced to do it. God broke open the coarse and apparently worthless casket and disclosed the hidden jewel. It has been so with every man and woman who has done great service in the world, and especially with every one who has done great service in the Kingdom of God—the prophets of the Bible, its soldiers and kings, the Disciples of our Lord, the philanthropists, preachers, missionaries, and leaders of the Church, St. Augustine, Chrysostom, St. Francis, Luther, Cromwell, Bunyan, and names innumerable. Common men all of them, without the least idea of their extraordinary endowments until faithful service revealed it to them and still more to the world. Their poor one talent, for which they were ready to apologise, grew into ten talents, nay a hundred talents, as they employed it in noble Godlike work. Yes, and every man who has honestly pursued the path of duty, following God's light with resolute and unswerving feet, has developed powers and revealed gifts which have been as great a surprise to his friends as to himself. You know not what powers you have, what hidden gifts, what seed grains of noble qualities, what latent influence and persuasiveness. You know not, and a great many never do

46 CALL AND EQUIPMENT OF A LEADER

know, because they never try to give their lives to noble uses. They never give God a chance to bring out what is in them. You only learn what is best and strongest in you, and what beautiful things you can do when you lay yourselves at God's feet and say, "Take my life, and use it in Thine own way." Each man is only revealed to himself, as Moses was, by going and doing where and what the higher voice bids him. Become an earnest faithful servant of Christ, busily working His work, and there will be born or developed in you powers, energies, and qualities of which you were all unconscious before. It will be like the creation of a new man, as it was with Moses.

II

Further, we are taught that the homeliest and most commonplace gifts and weapons can be made effective in God's service. "What is that in thine hand?" A bare rod! a staff! The thing which had served him in his humble toil. Well, God can do wonders through that. What have you in your hand? If you have nothing more you have those simple gifts and qualifications which you have been using all these years in your ordinary life. You have the knowledge which you got at school or have gathered from after reading. You have the patience and industry which have put you into a trade, business, or profession. You have the attractive qualities which have gained you friends, and given you some little influence. You have something that makes you liked by companions and children. You have a sympathetic nature which makes it a joy to you to

help others. These are common things; but they are no longer common when God touches them. The higher use you put them to, the more they are sanctified. The very dust shines like pure gold when it is laid at God's feet. He can and will make all these things mighty in turning hearts to goodness and filling the places where you work with a sweet witness for Him. Yet after all, it is not the rod that does the work, but the man full of God and faith and goodness behind it. Pharaoh and the Egyptians and the children of Israel got to be afraid of that rod, because they were afraid of the man who wielded it, and afraid of the Almighty who was behind him. They saw that God was with him, that God made him strong, made him fearless. It was character that told; the Godlikeness of the man, the straight, high purpose. They trembled before him because they saw in his face and conduct something more than human. They saw the dread shadow of the Almighty over and round about him. The evil of the world is always afraid of such men; they have a power not easily measured.

You have heard of Gordon in the Taeping rebellion in China, how he led the Imperial troops from one victory to another. In every battle he went in front virtually unarmed. He carried no sword. He carried nothing but a slender wand—a light cane painted white. When his own troops saw that, it inspired them; when the foe saw it they fled from it as from a host of serpents. Yes, but it was not the wand, though they thought it was. It was the man, the man who was so full of God, so sure of God that he never felt a tremor of fear, and never stooped to any mean or unworthy action. His serene and unsullied goodness made him great and terrible too to

those who were on the side of evil. Once some of the high officials of the Imperial Court, splendid magnificent personages, came to him with a huge bag of gold to bribe him to a certain course of action. He ordered some of his men to take the gold and fling it into the street, and then for the first time ~~he~~ used that wand as an offensive weapon. He laid on with all his might on the backs and heads of those august officials until they whined and cried for mercy. No wonder that they were afraid of this man. They said, "He is not human; he is a messenger of heaven; the powers above fight for him."

So it is with all in their measure who carry God with them, who show the marks of His purity and goodness on their faces, who are strong and fearless because of their faith. The world of sin and unbelief is afraid of them and yields to them. Think how the district visitor, the Bible-woman, the nurse, the Sister of Mercy will go through dens of iniquity and crime, into which policemen would not dare to go except in bands. They go at all times of the day and all times of the night, with no weapon but their simple purity and their fearless trust in God, and the worst ruffian in the city never molests them. If he did, his comrades, with all their brutality, would be ready to tear him to pieces. The worst men are awed and tamed by the sight of goodness, by the presence of those whom God has armed in His own sweet way.

And so you, if you fancy that you have no special gifts and equipment at all, can be made mighty by the simple faith which keeps you pure and makes you fearless. Dare to stand alone because God is with you; persistently refuse to do the wrong because you have a holy dread of Him. The simple goodness,

the unwavering goodness of one who carries God with him through the strife and temptation, is the mightiest weapon that has ever been devised, mightier by far than all intellectual gifts against the force of evil. And that is a weapon which, by the grace of God, we can all use.

VII

CALEB AND JOSHUA

THE CONFIDENCE WHICH WINS

Num. xiv. 8-9 : " If the Lord delight in us, then He will bring us into this land. Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land ; their defence is departed from them, and the Lord is with us : fear them not. But all the congregation bade stone them with stones."

THAT was what Caleb and Joshua said, the two brave men. And that was what the great cowardly mob answered—not arguments, but stones. It was a great deal easier to throw stones at two defenceless men than to go up and fight with those well-armed Canaanites. It has always been found easier to silence truth in that brutal fashion than to meet it with justice and overcome it with reason. Men who are short of brains and utterly destitute of courage are always ready to fall back on stones.

Caleb and Joshua thought they were well able to go up and drive out those sons of Anak and take possession of their land. All the rest of the people thought otherwise, and the vast majority carried the day, to their own destruction. For not one of those people ever entered the Promised Land ; their children gained it, but they themselves died in the barren wilderness before the golden fruit could be plucked. God sentenced them to death for their cowardice. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews sums up their part of the story in one word —"They could not enter in because of their unbelief."

He does not take the trouble to say whether it was unbelief in God or unbelief in themselves. There was no need; the two things are one, or at least they always go together. If you have no faith in God you have never much faith in yourselves. These men lost Canaan because they had the hearts of sheep in the bodies of men. Nothing venture, nothing have. They remained outside because they did not believe they could go in. Caleb and Joshua were right when they said we can do it, and the great multitude howled them down. So far as they spoke for themselves they were right. It was God's voice speaking through them. It was the language of heroism. But so far as they spoke for the mass of people they were wrong. These people were not able to do it. They had not got backbone, and grit, and staying power, and the spirit of soldiers yet. When Caleb and Joshua spoke in this way they were forty years in advance of their generation, and a man who preaches truth forty years in advance of the times is generally rewarded with stoning or some more civilised form of martyrdom. A prophet who comes too soon before men are in some measure prepared for his message gets his welcome in the shape of brickbats and execrations, and for the most part perishes ingloriously, with nothing accomplished. He sows tears and blood, and reaps only shame, and the real harvest is gathered, long after he is gone, by other labourers. John Wycliffe, in England, and John Huss, in Bohemia, were as great and courageous in every way as Luther, in Germany. But they failed because they came a hundred years too soon. He succeeded, because he came at the nick of time, when the world had been educated up to the point of receiving him. It is of no use having great men

among us if all the rest of us are little men. The great man can only do great things when he is backed by a number of others who only fall a little below him in stature and have a large share of his spirit. The wisest man is helpless if he has only fools around him. The most skilful general never wins a battle unless he has men to follow as brave and determined as himself. Joshua proved himself afterwards one of the ablest captains that ever lived, but if he had gone up to the battle with that craven multitude he would have miserably failed. No, the time had not come, the men were not ready. The leaders were there, but there was no army. There was only a howling rabble. It needed forty years of hard training in the wilderness to make soldiers of them. Forty years to inspire them with faith and valour enough to make the great attempt. As soon as they rose to the level of Caleb and Joshua, and believed that the thing could be done, they went up and did it with no great difficulty. They conquered as soon as they had daring and God-reliance enough to grapple with the thing, and that is only an Old Testament version of the truth which our Saviour was continually emphasising in His own sweeter way. All things are possible to him that believeth. If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed ye shall remove mountains.

Surely that is one of the conditions of success in every work and in every field. No men succeed unless they have faith enough in God or in themselves, or in both, to inspire them with confidence. A battle is never won except by soldiers who believe they can win. Napoleon gained all his victories because he refused to admit that there was such a word as impossible, and because he made his men

share with him that contempt of the impossible. It is the fearful and the unbelieving who say it cannot be done, and they never do it. Faint heart never won fair lady. Mr. Feeble Mind never won a prize of any sort, even in a lottery, and Mr. Timorous and Mr. Ready-to-halt never honestly earned the coat which they wear. If a child thinks he cannot do his school task, no schoolmaster will compel him to do it. If a boy thinks he cannot clear a pool at a leap he had better not attempt, for he is sure to drop down plump in the middle. If a student scratches his head over a book and before he has got through the first page declares that it is too hard for him, hammer and screws will not force that book through his mind. If you do not believe in your one talent or in your five talents, you might as well be without them. If you do not believe that you can be of use in the world, precious little use will be got out of you. And if you do not believe that God will help you and every man who trusts Him, God Himself can hardly give you the help that you need. "Our doubts are always traitors to us, and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt." Our needless fears are our worst enemies, and to keep on saying that a thing cannot be done is the surest way to make it impossible. If you would make any good of your lives, pray for a little of the spirit of these two men Caleb and Joshua, and believe that if the Lord be with you the ability to do and to overcome will be given.

Now, I apply that to the religious life, for all these things are types and symbols of the religious life. There are two sorts of people who decline the religious life, who hang back from what we call the battle of faith. There are those who think they

could do it if they would, but they had rather not; and there are those who fear they could not if they would, and so they never try. The first class, as a rule, are the younger people. Caleb and Joshua were young men. They could hardly have been much over twenty at this particular crisis. Their youthfulness perhaps helped to inspire them with confidence. The older men were afraid of themselves, for years bring caution and sometimes over-timidity. Youth has a natural belief in its own capabilities and strength. That is why the far greater number who enter the Christian life enter it comparatively young. The young think it possible. The high ideals do not seem too high for them. They are not dismayed and frightened by its difficulties. There is hardly a young man here who does not believe in his deepest heart that he could be a Christian if he were to make up his mind to go in for it. He believes that he could give up all the indulgences, companionships, and evil things which bar the way, and could take up any burden or vow which the Master was pleased to put upon him. There are few of you who would say, if you are young, "I cannot live a straight and pure, and honest, generous, noble life; I cannot be a good, true Christian man." You would be ashamed to acknowledge such weakness; you would be ashamed to rate yourselves so low. You feel that you could if you would, and if you do not it is because you would rather not. You are not convinced that the end is worth the cost. You are not drawn to the religious life. There are counter attractions. You love yourselves and the world's pleasures more than goodness and Christ's service and Christ Himself. You need to have your eyes opened to His beauty, and to be fired by His love. It is not so much the

sense of inability that keeps you back, but the unwillingness which only His spirit can remove.

But there are others perhaps, older in years, who wish they could and fear they cannot. An older person says, "I know too well the difficulties and temptations of the godly life. I have proved too often my own moral weakness and how easily I yield. And then I have formed habits and ways of life now of long standing. It is hard to change. It requires too great an effort to start afresh. I have not power for this thing, and if I tried I should fail." There are thousands who stand outside because they really distrust themselves too much to go in. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And to them we declare that their fears are always greater than they need be. They magnify the difficulties, and they underrate the helps. There is no time of life when a man may not become a faithful servant of Jesus Christ; no time when he may not start afresh and win victories over his oldest habits. Out of our very weakness we are made strong as soon as we honestly trust God and fling ourselves on the saving compassion and power of Jesus Christ. There is no devil which He cannot cast out. The man who has been forty years blind has his eyes opened. The man who has been lying impotent for thirty-eight years gets up and walks at Christ's word. The leper whose sores have been spreading over him for half a lifetime is cleansed by a saving touch. We can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth us.

And I say finally that we should all be better and far stronger if we took up the fight against any single sin in the spirit of those two men in our story; if we took up every bit of Christian service that we are called to, and every cross and burden that we have to

bear with a cheery feeling of confidence, a feeling that the thing can be done. It is crippling to say of any besetting sin—sin of temper, sin of speech, sin of the flesh—it is too much for me. It is paralysing to say of a trouble or a duty or a disappointment, or even of a bereavement, I cannot bear it, I shall utterly break down under it. The very conviction that you cannot do it steals the heart and courage out of you. It takes all the strength and reality out of your prayers. You cannot even say, "God help me," if you think this particular thing is beyond His help.

Battle with the sin as if you meant to win. Face the trouble as if the very spirit of the great Cross-bearer were in you. Have confidence that the might which strengthened Christ will strengthen you, and believe that in all things we can be more than conquerors through Him that hath loved us.

VIII

MOSES

A GREAT LIFE UNFINISHED

Deut. xxxiv. 4 : "I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither."

THERE are some half-dozen pictures in the Bible which stand out with peculiar prominence. They arrest the mind and fix themselves in the memory so fast that they can never be forgotten. People who know least of the Bible scenes and events generally know these. They are either exceptionally grand, or wildly tragical, or tearfully pathetic, and to look on them once is, in a sense, to see them for ever. No one can ever forget Job sitting in sackcloth in his ruined house, or David waiting for the tidings of his son Absalom, or Judas kissing his master in the garden, or the scene in which the Saviour of the world laid down His life. These pictures are so powerful, either in their beauty, pathos, or awfulness, that they lay hold of the dullest imagination and retain their place in it for ever.

And here is one of these great pictures, as striking as any except those in which our Lord figured. Moses, at the end of his earthly pilgrimage, standing on the mount of visions, looking down on the land not far away, which his feet were not to tread, the land which he had toiled to reach, which he had painted and prayed to gain for forty years; and dying there, with the one great hope of his life broken off.

If that scene does not stir you, your heart must be like stone, and your imagination wood. Men have always been drawn to it and fascinated. In many a hymn do we sing of that lonely ascent and that sweet, sad vision. On the canvas of many an artist, and in the melody of many a poem has that grand figure on the mountain appeared. Thousands of men of all sorts and conditions—kings, politicians, social and religious reformers, Christian workers—have seen in it a type and prophecy of their own lives and labours. It is indeed the standing illustration of aims unfulfilled, of work partly done but left unfinished, and of hopes that are never satisfied here but carried forward to the richer hereafter. Yet it has other and brighter suggestions. The great leader, it is true, had not attained the goal, he had not finished the work on which his heart was set. But it was not all disappointment, and it was by no means failure. His sun went not down in thick clouds. There was light in the evening time. He saw before him the goodly land. The promise was on the verge of fulfilment. His people were about to grasp the prize. He had carried forward God's plan a long way. The building only needed the crowning stone. He had done a noble and magnificent work, though it was not all he aimed to do. And the last thoughts of the man were sweet, if sad, "I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither." And from this two-fold aspect of the scene we get our lessons. And the first thought is this—

I

That our life and labours always bear an unfinished character. We are not permitted to be all that we meant to be. We never reach more than a part of what we strive for. You see a broken column on a grave. It speaks of a life prematurely cut short. That broken column is more or less a figure of every life. The night falls before the day's work is completed. The most grandly successful life falls short of its various purposes and aims unless its aims have been decidedly vulgar and low. You hear a few men boasting that they have done admirably well, that they have reached every coveted goal, that all things have come to which they gave their energies and ambitions. But these are men whose small natures are pleased with a little, whose vanity is early satisfied, and who quickly reach their top because their top is not far above the level. Most of us, however much we have gained and accomplished, are haunted by some sense of failure. We have memories of things attempted and not done, of hopes long cherished and not realised. We have had to abandon many a purpose, and to cast away many a beautiful dream. Few of our greater projects are carried out fully. We see the land before us, and are not permitted to enter. And just in proportion to the greatness of men's aims is the incompleteness of their success. If the summit of our ambition is to acquire wealth and achieve a passing popularity, that may be done with unlimited satisfaction, but if we set our feet towards purer and diviner things our success at the best is only partial. The noblest and most heroic of the world's workers have laboured for harvests which they did not gather, and died with

their best hopes unfulfilled. Abraham saw none of the promises realised. Moses never trod the promised land. David projected the temple, but did not build it. Our Lord Jesus died in the midst of apparent failure. Paul's lifelong dream of converting the Jews was never more than a dream. Latimer and Ridley perished in ignominy with the battle of Protestant truth seemingly lost. Livingstone died with the secret of the Nile still undiscovered. Gordon spent all his strength to redeem China and the Soudan from barbarism, and left them still wallowing in barbarism. A superficial judgment would have written failure on every one. It was not failure. It was only incompleteness. They saw Canaan afar off, but they were not allowed to enter it. It is so with all of us who are engaged in any truly great and generous efforts. If we are trying to build up our own lives in solid goodness and Christian worth, if we are taking part in any work of reform or soul-saving, and endeavouring to push the world forward to better things, we have to leave the thing unfinished. There is no complete victory given to any of God's soldiers, at least here on earth. There is only the slow onward march, often stopped, sometimes half baffled. There is the partial gain, the bit of progress, the bright gleams of success, the occasional clouds of doubt and misgiving, and then the night comes on, leaving the issue undetermined. Incompleteness is the law of the good life, always aspiring and never quite attaining. To all of us more or less God speaks this word—"I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither."

II

The incompleteness of our lives is a prophecy of their continuance. You read the story of any good man, and when it comes to the end, the visible end, you feel as if you had only read one volume, and you wait for the sequel, and almost instinctively write "To be continued." There must be other volumes. The man might have done so much more if he had been spared. There was so much power and influence and ripened experience at his command, and he has left fifty works that needed his mind and hand to carry them through. This cannot be the final word. Unless life is a grim satire there must be more to follow. My brethren, do we not all feel this in a measure of ourselves? There is a terrible irony in life if we see it all here and there is nothing beyond! We spend the greater part of it in getting ready for life. It is nearly all apprenticeship and preparation. We fool through youth, and blunder through middle age. We manage after a time to do a few things indifferently well, but always with a feeling that they might have been done better. We learn at last to command our tongue, to restrain our passions, to curb our follies, to take a truer estimate of ourselves. We find out what we can do, we get the mastery of our tools and weapons, we gain our influence, we begin to feel our power. Our strength has found its sphere, our energies are disciplined. Now we are fit for life, and can set to work to make the best of it. And then, alas! the end draws apace, and everything is left unfinished; and most of what we might have done is like that land which Moses saw but entered not. If this is all, human life is just a huge joke, and God is the author of the joke.

No, if God does not mean to fool the best and most trustful of His children, He intends that we should write on every concluding page of human life, "To be continued." He has written that word Himself. The very incompleteness of life points to an after fulfilment.

III

A good life is always incomplete, because it is just a part of God's great plan. His thought of you is what you are striving to attain, and that thought is always a great one. No wonder it always reaches high beyond your actual doings and gives you a sense of many things wanting. Moreover, all the good work we do falls into one great scheme and purpose of God. You carry it on to a certain point, no further; and you leave it necessarily unfinished. To you it must always seem unfinished, but God weaves it into His own great design, and carries it forward through other hands. You cannot cleanse a town from its moral corruptions, or make a nation sober or righteous, or kindle zeal in the whole Church of Christ, or even make the household in which you live Godfearing and Christian throughout. But you can take your God-appointed portion in that work, and if you do it faithfully, however incomplete it may seem to you, in God's eyes it is a beautiful and finished bit of work.

One can hear Moses saying to himself, "I have failed; the work of my life has come to naught; I have not brought the people into the promised land." And God must surely answer, "Thou hast not failed; thou hast helped the people forward; thou hast brought them to the verge of the land; that was thy

work; it was what I gave thee to do and it is done." There is no failure if you have attempted and accomplished just that little or much which the great Master set you to do. It may be a small, infinitesimal segment of the great circle, a mere dot in the huge circumference of God's saving purpose; but it was your part, and God will bless you for it and do the rest Himself. Our work is always incomplete, because we cannot see the finished results into which it will be woven.

IV

It is what the heart has purposed and earnestly striven for that finds acceptance with God. Not the thing done, but the thing honestly and zealously aimed at. We judge by results. The world at large judges by results. Men get little credit for the noblest energy and the finest heroism which end in real or apparent failure. The favours and flatteries are given to him who succeeds. But at God's judgment bar the verdict is not determined in that way. It is what a man with all his heart meant to be and do. In the records of heaven it is not Joshua that brought the people into Canaan, but Moses; not Solomon who built the temple, but David; not kings and parliaments that reformed the English Church, but the defeated martyrs; not successful millionaires that opened Africa, but missionaries like Livingstone, dying in loneliness. It was the great purpose of their lives, and, though they failed, heaven gives them the victor's palm. It is what you try to do, and what you would do if you had the opportunities and the gifts, which count in the higher courts. God makes allowance for what you cannot do. He measures

your difficulties, temptations, and weaknesses, and even if you fail, or partially fail, yet if there has been throughout an earnest purpose, an unceasing endeavour, a heart that set itself towards the diviner things, your very failure is in His eyes lovely, and perhaps better than some other people's triumphs.

V

And lastly, however many of our works and hopes are unfinished and unrealised on this side the grave, there is always given to faithful souls the vision of the better things which are to be. Faith has always its Pisgah Mount which commands the glorious land ahead, and where, above the mists of sin and doubt, we see the sunny splendour of promises fulfilled. Christ, in the darkest hour of His life, saw the breaking of the everlasting day, the coming morning when the shadows would disappear. In the very hour when all men forsook Him He had a triumphant vision of the time when all men would be drawn to Him. So we who have learned of Him never lose entirely that vision from the mountain top. We look forward with hopes that no language can measure. We journey toward the sunrising. God's golden age is on before. God's world is moving towards the perfect day. Nothing can shake our belief in the eternal fixedness of God's thought and purpose for the world and the certain coming of that time when Christ will see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. Our feet will not enter it here, but we shall see it all beyond. I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, though thou shalt not yet go over thither.

IX

JOSHUA

HERO, BY APPOINTMENT

Josh. i. 9 : "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong, and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

THESE words were said to a soldier young in experience, a comparatively untried man who had just stepped into a veteran leader's place, and who was to conduct the army of Israel through a stern and hazardous campaign. They were marching against a foe of whom little was known save through vague rumour. And rumour had invested that foe with superhuman prowess, attributed to him gigantic stature and perfect military equipment and surrounded him with supernatural terrors. Moreover, the men who were going on this business hardly seemed to be made of the stuff that endures and overcomes. They had proved themselves often untrustworthy, fickle, and even cowardly. They had run away from more than one critical fight, and shown themselves soft as clay in trials where hardness was specially required. Verily their leader needed a great heart to undertake such a venture; needed a prodigious confidence in himself or a sublime faith in a higher power to make him at all equal to his task. And here we read of the charge that was given to him from heaven, and which inspired him at the beginning of his labours.

It was a promise of unfailing divine help, and an exhortation to be resolute and fearless, to be of a strong and courageous temper, and to go forward with the certainty that the power which had sent him forth would ensure him victory. "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage: be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

Now these are words which every one of us can appropriate. They are words which God speaks to every one who goes forth at His bidding to any service of duty, to any sphere of conflict, to any moral effort or venture of faith. Words like these, or words to the same purport, are found in every part of the Bible. They run like a tradition through all its sacred stories, handed down from bleeding sire to son, passed on like the light of beacon fires from one generation to another. We have them in history, psalm, and prophecy, through all the wars, struggles, exiles, and martyrdoms of the Jewish people, and not less when we get to the milder precepts and bloodless warfare of the New Testament. There the field is changed, the fight is lifted to a higher arena, the wrestle is not with flesh and blood but with spiritual wickedness and immoral forces. Still we hear the same voice; still are we incessantly urged to be strong, to be not dismayed, to press on with cheerful courage, to fight the fight of faith as those who can endure hardness, to face our foes and battle down our temptations as those who have been called and equipped by God. Still are we warned against fearfulness and faint-heartedness, and told that without a determined will and a confident trust in God we can accomplish nothing. Paul won

greater victories than Joshua because he had more than Joshua's courage. Twelve simple-minded disciples overcame the world because they went against it with sublime confidence in their Master and no fear in their hearts save the fear of doing wrong. The Church was built up by men who had the stubbornness of a rock, with the tenderness of a child, and who did not know what it was to turn their back on a difficulty or hesitate in front of a danger. And so it has been through all religious history from Joshua's time until now. God loves brave men even better than we love them, for through them all His great works in the world have been accomplished. Now, take these words as addressed to yourselves, and what do they say to you? First, they give us the reason, the source, the root of a courageous heart and temper.

I

We are under orders. "Have I not commanded thee?" The secret of a fearless life and the strength of a godly life are found in this, that we have received a direct charge from God to take our part in the world's work and our place in life's battle, and there to quit ourselves in a way that will be pleasing to Him. We are not here by accident, or by our own appointment. We hold His commission in the warfare whether we are prominent leaders, or the humblest subalterns in the ranks. God has a purpose for each life, a plan of action for each life, a niche of service which each life may fill, a noble end which each life may attain. There is not one smallest cog or wheel or spring in the vast human machine which

does not bear the arrow mark of the great King, which He has not designed for noble and honourable uses. The meanest soul becomes great when it realises this divine word—"Have I not commanded thee?" Whether the lines are fallen to you in pleasant places, or your life is lived amid hardships and difficulties, there you are stationed by the highest of all authorities, and there you are required to serve Him by patience, goodness, and wholesome influences. Nothing can make you ashamed of your position or unworthy of it, or afraid of it if you are assured that God has sent you to it, and that it is the place where your part of His work is to be done. Men are cowardly and fretful and fiercely discontented in life's battle because they are practically atheists. They do not believe that God had anything to do with their appointment, or that He cares in the least degree what they do or what becomes of them. They look upon the battle as a sort of scrimmage into which they have been thrown by chance or circumstances, and in which each one must do the best for himself. In that case what does it matter how one lives, if he can only struggle through with the least possible pain and trouble? In order to resist the demoralising effects of our own conscious insignificance we need to believe in a divine election, to feel the motive spring of a solemn appointment. Know that your life is of consequence to Him, that He hears your prayers and feels your heart-beats and follows your movements. Nay, that He has put you where you are because He has need of you there, and there you are to render your simple witness of patience and goodness, never forgotten by Him, never overlooked. That will give you a sense of dignity; that will arm you against the evils of the world; that will keep you

steadfast and upright if you go forth each day with this imperial mandate on your lips. I am here by the will of God. "Have not I commanded thee?"

II

We are reminded of the need of a strong and fearless heart. "Be not afraid: neither be thou dismayed." From first to last we can do nothing well without that. There are lions in every way which only the brave soul can pass. Like the pilgrim in the story, we never know that they are chained until we advance up to them fearlessly. To get on, even in the vulgar sense, to reach any position that is worth filling needs strength, moral nerve, and a heart that grimly smiles at difficulties. Success, even in the lowest fields, can only be mounted by the ladder of courage. Feebleness and indolence sit down at the bottom of the ladder, whining over the steepness of the ascent. Faith and manhood grapple it with hands of prayer and determination, and slowly climb to the summit. Faint heart never won fair lady or anything else that was fair. The gates of success do not open like doors which swing back on their hinges when the fingers softly press an electric bell. They only open to those who have faith, and energy, and trust in God, and ability to bear hardship, and the spirit that never despairs, and some of the patience and perseverance of the saints. Be thou strong and of a good courage is written upon every door through which youth is eager to pass. And not less upon the gates of after life. The warfare does not get easier as we pass along. Sometimes the burden is so heavy, the cross so painful, the blows of disappointment so frequent,

that depression is apt to enfold one in darkness like that of a thunder-cloud, and the heart sinks low with a weary and lonesome fear. Some of you think, and not without cause, that life is hard, with its endless toils and competitions and never-absent worries and occasional strokes of misfortune. Yes; but you will not make it less hard by weakly yielding and bemoaning yourselves and indulging in vain indictments of Providence. The best way to get through trouble is not like Job's wife, to curse God and fling away all belief in Him because the troubles have come, but to hold faster to Him, as Job did, and say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." The trials of life are far more ugly when they are viewed by an unbelieving and therefore fearful heart. Faith and courage put a sort of glory on the dark face of sorrow, and paint a circle of sunlight around the heaviest thunder-cloud. The painful things of ordinary life show the soldierly qualities of a man and woman better than the tented field. They prove whether you are soft human wax or real gold, stamped with the image of Him who was the Prince of sufferers. Your religion comes out in this very thing. You know then whether it is on the surface or in the grain, deep rooted and spread through all the nature. Try to bear your crosses with the upward look and the disciplined spirit of Christ-made men. "Be strong and of a good courage."

Ah! and how much we need this quality in our daily endeavour to grapple with our moral temptations and to live any sort of truthful, sober, honourable, and consistent Christian life. The feeble man and woman get so easily wearied, disheartened, impatient, and even demoralised. It is such uphill work, they say. They imagined when they began it

that it would be so much smoother and easier. They fancied, perhaps, they would walk to heaven with silver slippers on their feet and on paths strewn with moss and roses. But what voice ever told them that? It was no heavenly light that painted that vision for them. That was begotten in the delusive world of dreams. No; every word of God has forewarned us that the way to a higher life is narrow and steep and often rough, and always beset with hindrances. It is always a climb, and never a descent. It is always a battle, though there are rills of pure joy by the way and the shining of a great hope above our heads. It is never easy to be a good man or to follow Christ, even though it be far off. But He who has called you to it and made the way what it is, is saying to you continually—Be strong and very courageous, fear not thy temptations, be not dismayed by the forces which hinder the advance, tremble not at thine own weakness or at the strength of the unruly and hostile passions which are in thyself, for the God in whom thou trustest is far mightier than thine own poor heart, and more are they that be with thee than all that is against.

We need to be of good courage, and

III

Here is the promise which sustains it. The exhortation commences with this, "Have not I commanded thee?" and it ends with this, "The Lord God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." He who sent us into the battle makes Himself our companion and fellow-soldier there. He who gave us our orders charges Himself with our success. He

who appointed our place is there before us to fit us for the place and the place for us. It is the divinest thought of all in the Christian life that He never orders us to go alone into any sphere of conflict, into any wrestle with temptation, into any fearsome places where nothing but foes and darkness are about us. We are never away from our invisible ally and helper. Step by step the unseen presence keeps pace with our march. If He leads us into temptation He does lead; He does not come after to witness our defeat. He is there before to deliver us from the evil. If He lays the cross upon us He is our yoke-fellow close by our side, bearing the greater part of the cross Himself. Silently, invisibly He communicates His strength to us. Every prayer brings us forces not our own, every cry for help secures His firmer hold, and in every moment of faintness His touch is ready to animate courage afresh. "Lo! I am with you alway," is the word which gives new life and spells out each day's watchword.

We are not ourselves in this work and warfare, but ourselves supplemented and supported by the mightiest of all. We are more than human. We lend ourselves out to omnipotence, and He gives us back to ourselves with redoubled might. It is not man's work, but the work of God in man. Be strong therefore and of a good courage; be not afraid; neither be thou dismayed. God has commanded thee and appointed thee to battle with sin and wear the crown of goodness, and He will be with thee whithersoever thou goest.

X

JOSHUA

THOROUGHNESS AND DECISION

Josh. xxiv. 15: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve ; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

THESE words sound harsh. On the surface it is as if Joshua meant, you may do as you please and take the consequences, but you shall not drag me along with you. Yes ; the words meant that, but they meant something more. There was an earnest and tender appeal in them. Joshua was a rough soldier, but he had soft places in his heart, especially towards those people. He had shared their hardships, and led them through many a fight to many a victory. He had grown old in their service. He loved them as a father loves his children. And the anxious love expressed itself in this address. They had followed him so far ; they were now at the parting of the ways. Were they going to follow him still, or was he to go alone ?

He had been going over the story of their marches, battles, deliverances, and successes, telling how they had been helped forward and brought into their promised inheritance by the mighty hand of God. He had spoken with withering scorn of those Canaanite gods who utterly failed the foolish people that relied on them. Then he winds up with this question—Are you disposed to change masters ? Do you think these senseless idols will be a better defence

to you than the God of your fathers? He knew that they were facing both ways. They wanted to dance to two tunes at the same time. They were professing to be worshippers of God and yet introducing heathen images into their tents. They wanted to have the benefit of both systems. If they could have the Lord to fight for them as of old, and these other deities to fall back upon in case of need, it would be a double safeguard and advantage. Besides, the Canaanite religion was so very indulgent. It had no stern moral commandments; it smiled on vices; it allowed men to do just as they pleased. Might they not take what suited them best from each? And Joshua told them that the thing was impossible. It was yoking contradictions together, and mixing up darkness and light. God and Baal could not march in company; neither could those who followed them. They must decide for one or the other. It was like the Saviour's words spoken long after—"No man can serve two masters." "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." There you have the scene, the place and occasion of these words. Let us look now at some of the applications.

I

It says first, be thorough; be one thing or the other. Do not attempt to be a religious man and an irreligious man at the same time, because you cannot. Do not follow Christ with one foot turned towards Him and the other foot moving in another direction, because that is physically and morally impossible. Joshua was one of those men who know what they mean to do and do it, and he had only pity and a spice of anger for the weak and vacillating men

whose minds are always balancing, who never learn to spell thorough. The Romans had a god named Janus, with two faces which looked in opposite directions at the same time. But they generally made fun of that god, and laughed at all the people who were like him. The Bible throughout expresses itself in much the same language as Joshua. It has no patience with the double-minded, with those who, to use the quaint figure of the prophet Elijah, hop between two opinions, hop forward on one leg and then hop back on the other. That means with those who want to divide their lives equally between the better things and the worse, and blow hot and cold with the same breath. There is almost more hope for the man who deliberately gives himself up to the service of the world and the devil, than the man who has no fixed purpose at all, but wavers and shifts about like the wind, who plays like a fish round goodness a bit and then nibbles at the devil's bait, and in floating between the two gets securely hooked by the evil one at the last. Saul of Tarsus was far nearer conversion when he was obstinately fighting against Christ than fifty people I know who have been halving themselves between Christ and their own unchristly desires for years. One of our present London preachers when he was a young man stood on London Bridge watching the crowd go by. He thought of life and all its pleasures, chances, and prospects, and what was the best thing to go in for, and in his reckless, defiant mood he cried out, "The devil's service pays best; I will go into that thoroughly!" He did for a while, not long; the very horror of his vow frightened him, haunted him, and at last drove him to God. He was perhaps nearer to a religious life when he stubbornly defied God than many another man who is neither strong on

one side nor another, but just drifts up and down and sideways, always hoping that it will somehow come right in the end, but never trying to make it right now. Which is it to be? I believe that if young men would set it down in black and white that they mean to throw off all religion, and live a life in which God and real goodness shall have no place; if they would write that as their fixed resolve, they would presently be so ashamed of it, so sick of it, that they would spring back with a shudder from it and take the other course. But the majority make no such resolve as that. They turn and tack and drift. Their course is a zig-zag. They will not declare for an irreligious life, neither will they have much to do with the other thing. They will not break all the cords which bind them to the better life, but they will hold fast to the strings which are pulling towards the worse. They will not go in for a life of loose indulgence and immoralities, nor will they set their faces towards higher endeavour. They will neither be good nor bad, saints nor sinners, but the something that comes between. And alas! it is always more and more towards the evil; gliding, sliding, slipping down until their choice is determined and they are found among the multitude who worship everything rather than God. There are men and women in all our congregations, and even among our Church members, like that. This want of thoroughness is the weakness and peril of our churches. We have scores of people who face both ways. They want to serve God a bit, but not too much. They do not want to be disowned by Christ, but they wish still less to have too much of Him. Religion has its value, but there are other things worth a great deal more. They are far more alive and animated and earnest when they are engaged in any other pleasure

or occupation than when they are taking part in God's worship or hearing of Christ's work. All the energy and fire in them are called out by other things. It is only the sleepy will and the dead ashes of fervour that they lay on God's altar, and that is what makes our Church life so languid and our Church work so feeble. We want more decision, more resolve, more whole-heartedness, more intensity in this work. We want to believe in it thoroughly, and not with the tips of our fingers. With most of us it is still a question, shall the Kingdom of God or the pleasures of the world stand first? "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

II

These words meant—Choose your master, and take care that you fix on the right master. Whom will ye serve? Now, that is a choice which we all have to make and do make. Some may be surprised to hear it, but it is a fact. We have all a master. Some have more than one. They have half a dozen. I am not speaking of the masters who pay our wages. They are only over us in the work hours, and have no power over our inner life. I am thinking of the more powerful masters who rule our thoughts and sway our actions. We are always yielding to other minds and other forces greater than ourselves. It is for the most part vainglorious boasting and braggadocio when a man says, "I am my own master, perfectly independent; I will do what I think right, and submit to no dictation from any one." That is magnificent language, but not much more substantial than swollen egotism and froth. It is vulgar self-assertion, strutting before the public as a hero. The weakest and most yielding men are those who are constantly

bragging of their independence. The most abject slaves that Christ met with, who swallowed every word that the Scribes and Pharisees spoke, and almost licked the feet of their priests and rulers, were the men who loudly boasted, "We were never in bondage to any man." That is the way of things. Men throw off one master only to take on another. They say, "We will not be dictated to by capitalists," and then give themselves over, bound hand and foot, to a trade union. They say, "We will not have the yoke of parents upon us any longer," and straight-way become obedient slaves to their companions, doing without question anything which they are ordered to. They say, "We will not be priest-ridden, we will not be under the parson's thumb, we will not be held down by these religious people," and almost immediately they surrender themselves to the influence and authority of other, and often far less wise, minds. And we are all under the power of certain ideas, certain fashions of thought, if we are not slaves to any particular men. We are carried along by some stream of influence, as it is called. We are swept along in the current of sin, pleasure, money-getting, or low thought, or we are carried along and upward by a richer current of godly thought and pure endeavour. You have to make your choice. It is not a question of master or no master, but a question of which master? Will you on the whole yield yourselves to the good, or put yourselves under the dominion of the evil? Shall it be the law of God that sways you or the customs of a godless world? Will you take upon you the yoke of Jesus and let your lives be shaped in the main by His teachings and orders, or will you go into life's battle under another flag and under other captains? That is the question which we have to answer, not once, but every

day. Whose servant am I? What voices, fashions, forces, and influences am I submitting to? What master is it to be? "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve."

III

And the third thought in these words is—Choose your companions, your society, and friends. Decide, said the Godfearing Joshua, whether you will go with me and with them that serve the Lord, or with them that take the way of the Canaanite. Or, in other words, will you belong to the Church or the world? We all need society, and, what is more, all of us will have it. Men do not walk alone. They flock together. We cannot live without fellowship. We grow in companies and congregations, and we fall into the ways of the society we love best. Men climb Godward in ranks, and they follow the devil in gangs. The problem is, are you going to bind yourselves to godly Christian people, or march with the others? It is not easy to mix them up. Your real friends will be chosen on the whole from the religious people or the contrary. And there is little doubt which will be the most helpful. A church is not composed of perfect ones; they are not all saints. But a church with the smallest spiritual endowments is better than no church. Its aim is higher; its ideals are better. The people who form a church of Christ, whatever blemishes they have, are a purer people, more righteous, more tender-hearted than any other class or set of people you will find. They are united for a good purpose; to help one another to goodness, to strengthen one another, to encourage and watch over one another. All that is best in you will be drawn out and cultivated by making your-

selves part of them. You are worth a man and a half if you join yourselves to comrades. Ten men united for the same thing make each man ten times as strong as he was. You multiply the ten by ten and you have a hundred. Choose your companionships.

IV

And do not wait for any one else. Let the language of the brave old captain be yours. "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." No matter what others do. If your friends will not go with you, grieve for them, but do not let them keep you back. If they will not let you draw them up, unfasten the ropes which bind you to them lest they pull you down. God does not hold you responsible for them if you have done your best to persuade them to come along with you. You are free, and you will not have to answer for their unbelief, but for your own. God says to each of us, play thou the man, whatever others do. Christ says, I have called thee by thy name. There is a place in My ranks for thee. There is room for the others too; but if they leave the place empty, what is that to thee? At least fill thine own. Why should their indecision make thee feeble? If they will not have the prize, why shouldst thou throw it away? Go thou alone if necessary; One will go with thee who is worth all other friends, and one man with Him to help is stronger than a host.

That last word of Joshua is the word of every true man—"Though all the rest go the other way, as for me, I will serve the Lord."

XI

SAMSON

UNCONSCIOUS DEGENERATION

Judges xvi. 20 : "And he wist not that the Lord was departed from him."

A CHILD will tell you that Samson was the strongest man that ever lived. And that is how most grown-up people think of him. They picture him as a sort of Hercules; a big, brawny giant, with muscles and sinews of iron, with the strength of an elephant or a score of men, able to wrestle with lions, and carry off massive city gates on his shoulders; a tremendous fighter, too, ploughing his way through armies, and slaying a thousand men at once with the jawbone of an ass. And of course, all that is in the picture; but it is only a small part of the picture. This man, as the Bible presents him, is not a huge, brainless athlete. He is a man of brains as well as muscle. He is a wonderfully clever man, richly endowed with gifts, and not wanting in genius. He bubbles over with wit and humour and flashes of poetry. The Philistines are but clay or witless clowns in his hands. He can trick and fool and make sport of them, and lead them whatever dance he pleases. His own countrymen almost worship him. They are ready to follow him as their God-sent leader, and he has all the fascinations which attract men and compel their obedience. Moreover, there is not wanting in him the religious faculty. He believes in the God of

Israel, and is conscious at times of a divine calling. He feels that he has been appointed to lead and judge the people, and to deliver them from the yoke of those hated Philistines. He steps on the field of history with all these endowments, with all this glorious promise. And he virtually fritters them away. His life is miserably disappointing. There are just a few spurts and flashes of heroic energy which show us what he might have done, and fill us with pity and scorn because he did not do more. He failed where so many gifted lives fail, by forgetting duty in pursuit of pleasure, by lying on the lap of self-indulgence, by using his strength for his own private, and sometimes wicked, ends, and by letting sense and appetite rule instead of conscience and the higher claims of God. He ruled Israel twenty years, says the historian, or, rather, he neglected to rule it, and then the end came. The Philistines revenged themselves for his pranks and cruel jokes, and his life went out in a scene of tragedy which has few parallels in the Bible. No need to recall that. I turn your thoughts rather to this significant sentence in the story—"He wist not that the Lord was departed from him." He imagined that he still possessed all his former strength, and lo! he had fallen to the level of other men, and become, indeed, well-nigh as weak as a child. It had been a slow fall. You are not to suppose that his powers deserted him in a night or in an hour; or that the Lord abandoned him just because he told a woman his secret and let her shave his head. That is only a forcible and dramatic way of expressing the change for the worse which gradually came over him. The degeneracy went on for years. He declined day by day into a morally and mentally feeble man. His

brilliant intellect got beclouded over and soddened. His energy and originality lost their spring. His attractive and commanding gifts ceased to charm. He abused his powers, and they slipped away from him. His conscience went to sleep and his religious sense was deadened. Not all at once, but by degrees and imperceptibly. For that is the penalty which men pay when they are every day sporting with Delilahs, or sporting with drink, or playing with the devil in any of the forms in which that personage appears. He slowly robs them of their strength, of their intellectual force, of their very wit and humour. They stake their genius, they stake their religious faculty, they stake all the best parts of their manhood, and if the game goes on long enough the devil always wins and goes off with the lot. I take that as the full, true meaning of the story. Delilah is only a general name for the temptations to which he yielded, and the selfish and unholy delights for which he sold his noble self. And all that he lost by so doing is comprehended in the expressive words, "The Lord departed from him."

And he knew not. He awoke out of his sleep, and went out as at other times to shake himself, confidently believing and asserting that he was just the same man as of old, until the Philistines came down upon him and he had no more strength to resist them than a bit of wax. "He wist not that the Lord was departed from him." Now that is one of the most pathetic facts of life.

I

That our strength often goes, and we are unconscious of it. The invalid whose strength has been

wasted in some long confinement or fever will rise from his bed thinking that he is as well able to walk as ever, and he only discovers how weak he is when he collapses with the first effort. Still more frequently does this happen in the mental and intellectual sphere. Many a great statesman, great writer, great poet, great preacher goes on long after his brilliance has faded out, after his lips and pen have lost their cunning, and thinks himself still a star of the first magnitude when other people are saying, "How are the mighty fallen, and the pure gold become dross!" The singer rarely believes that the voice which was once so sweet has now become shrill and discordant. The artist will hardly ever admit that his creative power has vanished, and that there is no touch of genius left; and the woman of fascinating beauty can hardly be persuaded that the time ever comes when her power to charm is gone. Perhaps in these things it is well that it should be so; it is a merciful provision. God permits, and perhaps ordains, a little of this blindness to the facts just to make the declining years of life somewhat easier. Life would be much sadder than it is if we always knew at once just when the lamp which has been burning so brightly begins to sputter and flicker and grow dim, as if the oil was nearly used up. Yes, God is very kind not to let us know all that at once. And if you are tender-hearted you will bear a good deal before you tell the older folk that they are not what they once were. Let them find it out in God's time. That will be quite soon enough.

II

But it is much sadder and far more lamentable when the same thing happens in the moral sphere

and in the religious life. Young people and middle-aged people are continually losing the best that is in them, and are pitifully blind to the waste that is going on, and quite unconscious of the loss. There are young men who sport a little occasionally with some evil and forbidden thing, some wicked self-indulgence. They are always saying to themselves they can give it up when they please; always declaring that they are masters of themselves, and can pull up when the thing becomes dangerous. Yet their resisting power is going. The sin becomes a fixed habit, holding them with chains of iron. They cannot shake it off. Their strength has melted away and they knew it not. They do a little betting, only at certain times when it comes in their way; they laugh at the thought that they will ever become habitual gamblers. Is thy servant a dog that he should do this? Why, they have only a shilling or a half-crown on some particularly favourite race. It is absurd to think that general dissipation and demoralisation, and perhaps acts of dishonesty, will grow out of that. Do you suppose we are fools, or children, and do not know when and where to stop? They are as strong as ever, they think. Presently they are doing a little on most races. They are getting drunk with the excitement, and cannot live without it. They are floating down towards Niagara Falls, declaring that they can stop and turn the boat whenever they are disposed. But they go over nevertheless! Their power has gone from them, and they knew it not. No one ever believes that he is on the way to ruin or damnation. The immoderate drinker never believes that he is rapidly degenerating into a confirmed drunkard. He always tells you in the earlier stages of his fall, and even when he is far advanced, that he is perfectly able to hold himself in. He laughs

at you, or perhaps is furiously indignant, if you utter a word of warning, if you hint that the serpent's coils are twining around him and that he is becoming a slave to his appetite. He becomes a drunkard in the very act of boasting that he is still a sober and well-governed man. He knows not that his strength has departed from him. You play with scepticism and irreverence. You do a little sport with the Delilahs who make fun of the Bible, who fling sneers at the sanctuary and the preacher and religion. You join in the laughter at sacred things, which never comes from thoughtful lips, which is always the laughter of fools. You mean no harm; you have no intention of letting go all your religious beliefs—no intention of dwarfing and starving and losing your religious feelings and your religious faculty. No; but you go sporting more and more with the unbelief and the profane frivolity, and presently all your respect and love for sacred things is gone. Your religious faculty has almost left you, and you knew it not.

III

Christians who lose their grip of Christian things are hardly ever conscious of the loss they are sustaining. What we call backsliders hardly ever acknowledge to themselves that they are backsliding until the thing is too palpably and glaringly manifest to be doubted or denied. There are people in every church and congregation who are slowly drifting, drifting towards the wreckage or perhaps the utter indifference which is painful as utter unbelief. You can see it. Everybody can see it except themselves. You can see that the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches are slowly choking the

good seed of the kingdom. You can see that the fashions and gaieties and pleasures, and ambitions of the world have taken the place in their hearts which was once filled by Jesus and His love and the hopes of the Gospel. You can see that the house of prayer has lost all its charms and attractive powers for them. They drop in occasionally by the force of old associations, but its services are a weariness to them. Their hearts are not there. There is something in them dead that was once alive enough. But they do not know it. Everybody else can discern the signs, but they are blind to them. They will probably tell you that they are just as religious as ever, but they do not need the sanctuary and the public prayer and the preaching and things of that kind; they have got beyond them. In fact, the glory has gone out of their souls, and a darkness is upon them which they do not feel. It is the story of Samson with a Christian interpretation. "He wist not that the Lord was departed from him."

And there I leave the story to preach its own moral and point its own warning. The best of us need that warning. The most Christian of us may lose the light that is in us amid the darkening surroundings of daily life. There are a hundred influences at work about us, tending to rob us of our strength, our earnest faith, our Christian fervour, our joy in God, and our impassioned devotion to Him who died for us. And these things go from us unconsciously unless we are ever nourishing them, kindling them afresh, watching over them, and jealously saving them by prayer. And our Lord Jesus is always saying to us in His own dear words what the Old Testament story teaches us, "Watch and pray lest ye enter into temptation."

XII

MICAH

THE IMAGE MAKER

SACERDOTALISM OLD AND NEW

Judges xvii. 13 : "Then said Micah, now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite for my priest."

THIS is a curious story with a singular ending—and not very edifying at first sight, or second sight either. You read the chapter through, and then wonder how it got into the Bible, and why it was preserved. And the only reason you can conjecture is that it was given to show us what pitiable creatures men become when they lose knowledge of the true God and put superstition and priestcraft in its place; and what a gross imposture religion becomes when it is not based on true repentance and righteous endeavour, but is a mere set of tricks and forms done to curry favour with the higher powers. It is sometimes useful, but not often, to look upon a picture of what ought not to be, to look upon it with a sort of loathing, that we may learn thereby what ought to be. And I think the Bible has given us this very objectionable story with some such intent, just as the Spartans used to make their slaves disgustingly drunk that their free-born sons might behold and take warning. Now bear with me as I take up the thread of the story, and remind you, first—

I

How a religious house, or if you like the word better, a house of superstition, was built. The story begins with fraud. A young man steals his mother's savings. She has got together about one hundred and thirty pounds—no small fortune in those days—probably got together by various sharp practices, if we may judge from her subsequent dealings, and she has gloated over it with all the fierce joy of a miser, and worshipped it as misers do. The loss of it is like tearing out her very heart, and in rage and desperation she calls down maledictions upon the thief, and consigns him to the vengeance of all the powers above and below. She has no suspicion whatever that the culprit is her own son. Time passes, and her furious wrath subsides. She finds that fretting and cursing will not bring the treasure back, and resigns herself to make the best of the loss. Then comes a happy thought. The money is clean gone, there is hardly the remotest possibility of ever recovering it. Why not use it, therefore, to secure an interest in another world? That is just lovely! The thing need not be wasted after all. So she makes a pious vow that if it ever comes back—which it never will—she will give it up to God's service; and with this vow recorded she sleeps the sleep of the just, and feels that she is fast on the way to sainthood. Forgive me for hinting that it was very much in the same manner and spirit that most of the endowments of ancient churches and monasteries came. Generous gifts of pious ancestors, you are told. I am afraid their piety was often of a very questionable kind, and their generosity not altogether disinterested. They only gave their money to God—money, perhaps, not

acquired with the cleanest hands—they only gave it to God when death was taking it from them, and it could be of no further use to them; and they gave it with the hope that it might stand to their credit in the final account, and be set over against the black catalogue of their sins. When people talk to me of these pious ancestors, I smile and say nothing. It does not do to inquire too carefully where all the religious endowments came from. Some things have to be taken on trust, if they are taken at all. And, perhaps, on the whole, it would have been far better for the Church if it had never been enriched by these dubious bequests. God does not love robbery for burnt offerings, and I do not think He has any great respect for those who give Him their life, or give Him their goods at the very last, when it costs them nothing.

But now to return to the story. The treasure which this woman has religiously handed over to God because she cannot have it herself, is unexpectedly restored. The son is very much like the mother, as you might expect. He is just as dishonest, and equally superstitious. He has no filial affection, but he is awfully afraid of the curses which have been spoken. He feels no shame for the wrong which he has done; but those dreadful maledictions haunt him, and he fears they will bring down some fire or thunderbolt, or stroke of misfortune. At last, to escape his terrors, he confesses the theft, and brings the money back. The mother weighs it in her hand again. Oh, miracle of goodness! She counts every coin to see that none are missing. She kisses it and adores. The lost is found, and the dead come to life. Ah! but now arises this terrible perplexity. She has promised the whole of it to God; just as

many a man declares that he will devote his wealth to great and noble ends if God should ever give him wealth. It is so easy to promise when you haven't got the thing ; but to give when you have it—that is another side of the matter. To say what you would do if you had the opportunity is most sweet and self-satisfying. It makes you feel so good ! But to do it when the opportunity comes, that is far more beautiful, and not every one does that. You had better serve God now, my friends ; be a Christian now ; give a little of your time and money to Christ's works now, and do not excuse yourselves by promising to do far greater things hereafter. You will be almost certain to break those promises if you do not begin by doing something now. This woman had been most generous in handing over to God—nothing—a promissory note with no assets. Now all the money is in her hand, so lovely and enticing, and, alas, it belongs to Him, every shekel of it, unless she forswears herself. Whatever is she to do ? Oh, cruel dilemma ! Give it up ? No ! that is like letting out all her blood. Withhold it ? No, she dare not. These unseen powers will send some blight or plague upon her. At last she hits upon a happy compromise. It shall be neither the one nor the other, but both. She will keep her vow and break it. She will serve God and Mammon—especially Mammon—and square things generally with both worlds by giving a little to the other world, and a great deal to this. She has just the least bit of religious conscience. Surely you meet with men who have that same tiny bit, and it hampers them dreadfully. They dare not set God at naught altogether, yet they are most anxious to let Him have as little of their lives as possible. This woman will give Him a small instalment, just enough

to keep Him quiet. Surely He will not be too hard. Nay, perhaps He will not know. He does not count money as we do, and perhaps He will think that she has given Him all when she has only given Him a part. So she hands over one-fifth of the shekels, and keeps back four-fifths. And with that one-fifth they build a little chapel, and stock it with images, and engage a priest to carry on services in it, and their souls have rest. Their god is bought off, and I suppose their future is made secure. Thus was that house of superstition built. I wonder if we ever build in that way, or in any way that resembles it; if we build thus our hopes of God's favour and our hopes of heaven. But before you answer that, let us carry the story to its climax and see—

II

How the house got its priest, its certificate of orthodoxy, and its assurance of salvation. Yes, it was properly patented, saved from all irregularity, and guaranteed to be without flaw by a very simple device. The church had been built and furnished, doubtless with its altar and pictures and dolls and incense pans, and probably holy water. These things have never varied much from the earliest times until now. Wherever honest faith goes out, these dishonest substitutes for faith come in. Micah and his mother had got them all, for they belonged to very High Church—to very High Church indeed. But still the main thing was wanting. They had no ministering official to confer grace upon them, and upon all this furniture. The official came, however, in the nick of time. By chance there passed a Levite that way in search of a situation. A Levite, mark

you! A member of the orthodox priestly race, in the true priestly succession, properly ordained, an unmistakable channel of spiritual gifts. No mere coincidence this, that the Levite should pass that particular way. Here was a godsend if ever there was one. Forthwith they impounded this young sprig of the priesthood, that is to say, engaged him. And he must have been a very impecunious gentleman to accept their terms. About one guinea a year, with clothes, board, and lodging thrown in. Salvation on the cheap; a penny a day would cover the whole of the expenditure, and leave something over for the cleaning and lighting of the chapel. And the man was dear at that. He had not been long in the service before he transferred himself to a higher bidder, and went off without giving notice, carrying away as much of the sacred furniture as he and a few others could lift. In fact they had made no inquiries about character, and as to abilities, they were of no consequence in that office. They only wanted to know that he was a fully-ordained priest, certified to be the genuine article. If you have got the true succession, what more do you need? The grace flows through that channel irrespective of character. It is not absolutely necessary that we should have holy men, praying men, prophets and teachers. The indispensable thing is to have duly certified functionaries or machines. And this Levite fulfils the condition. Here, then, we have Micah in a jubilant and infinitely satisfied state of mind. "Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite for my priest." The whole of the saving machinery is there, Church, ritual, creed, consecration, and a priest to invest it all with sanctity. Micah has no further trouble of mind. That obliging

official will relieve him of all responsibility. The priest will do all the little business which requires to be done with God. If heaven needs a daily sacrifice, there is the priest ready. If Micah wants to do a little more thieving or practices in the same line, there is the priest prepared to receive his confessions and assure him of absolution. The whole thing works beautifully, and at the trifling cost of a penny a day, too. Who would not be religious on such easy terms?

And now forgive me, my brethren. I think I need forgiveness for dwelling so long upon this revolting picture, this hideous mockery of God and of religion. For if God were at all like this, if God could be cheated by such childish tricks and mummery, we could not worship or love Him, we could only hold such a being in contempt. The god of these foolish and dark imaginations is not our God at all.

Yet the echoes of these old superstitions are still heard. They are heard in what are called Christian churches. There are things now not far removed in spirit from that which I have been describing. I can hear Micah speaking still in many a modern voice. I hear him saying, "This church of mine is the only true church. Its ritual is faultless; its orthodoxy is indisputable; its priests are fully qualified. They can confer grace, offer sacrifices, grant absolution, and make things generally easy and comfortable. I can leave the matter in their hands with a feeling of entire security." "Now I know that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite for my priest." Let us charitably allow that under all and in spite of all that, there is sometimes a true religious spirit, an endeavour after goodness, and a genuine devotion to Christ.

But, oh ! the darkness and paganism of all such trusts as these ! Alas, that man should believe in Christ and still cling to some of Micah's stupid superstitions ! It is like holding dead corrupt things in the one hand and the living Christ in the other, and trusting equally to both. My brother, believe me, the most orthodox church cannot save you, or the most faultless creed, or the most refined and perfect ceremonial, or the most strictly and accurately ordained priest. In fact, the priest can do nothing at all for you which you cannot do better for yourself with the mighty spirit of God helping you. God is not pleased with any of these things. How can He be ? He has a great, loving, fatherly heart, and nothing can please Him but the genuine service of loving hearts. God is not mocked. He sees through all the petty devices of those who try to serve Him with mere forms and postures, sacraments, and artificial sacrifices. Men only deceive themselves by these things, they never deceive Him. You cannot get anybody to do this solemn business of life for you. It cannot be done by deputy. You must yourselves walk humbly before your God, and do justice and love mercy, and you must be born again, not of the font and chrism, but of the Spirit of God. You must trust for forgiveness only to that sacrifice which Jesus offered up once for all. You must believe in the great love wherewith He loved you, and try to show your love for Him by doing His works and walking in the ways of His commandments. That is the faith which saves ; and everything which is offered as a substitute for that is only a modern imitation of those dark doings of poor deluded Micah, and everything else is but the old sacerdotal foolery with a new face.

XIII

SAMUEL

THE TRAINING OF A PROPHET

I Sam. ii. 26: "And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour with God, and also with men."

THE Bible tells us very little about the childhood of its great men. It only introduces them to us when they are grown up and fit to begin their life's work, and we have to guess and dimly imagine what their young lives were like. We know nothing of the early days of Abraham, or of the child life of Moses, David, St. Peter, and St. Paul. Even of Jesus there is only one beautiful picture given of His young bright days. We see Him, as a boy of twelve, asking questions in the temple, and then He passes out of sight until His ministry begins.

The only exception which the Bible makes is the instance of Samuel. The account of his early life is really the only thing of the kind which the sacred pages contain. It is the story of a child's growth, of a child's education, of a child's first prayers and religious beginnings, of a child's shaping into a man of God. There is a sweet simplicity in it, and there are touches of beauty. It is in some things like the breath of Spring and the smell of flowers. And therefore it ought to supply us with a few thoughts concerning our children.

I

It tells us of his mother. No biography is complete without that. The father is not of so much consequence in the story ; the mother is indispensable. Paint her moral portrait for me, and I can guess what the child will be like. Samuel's life began well, with a praying mother kneeling beside his cradle, and praying lips teaching him the first words he knew. At the very outset, before he knew good and evil, she gave him in her heart to God, and cherished always the one dear hope and dream that he would grow up into the beauty of holiness and meet for the Master's use, that he would be a priest, teacher, prophet, or she cared not what, so long as he was devoted to the highest service. As soon as he could think and talk, she brought him to the house of God to begin his apprenticeship. The temple was to be his home, nursery, and school, and high thoughts his daily meat and drink. She laid her dearest treasure upon the altar, and prayed, "Take him, O God, and make him Thine and make him worthy." And the Lord answered, as Jesus might have answered, "O, woman, great is thy faith ; be it unto thee even as thou wilt." For the young soul thus borne up on the wings of his mother's prayers, took the Godward direction and realised the good and noble future which she had drawn for him. Would it not be always thus, or nearly always, if we trained our children for God with the same singleness of purpose and the same unwearying devotion ? Our children will become in the main features what their mothers prayerfully and persistently determine they shall be. The picture of life which the mother always holds up before them will be the end, the ideal towards which

they strive, and her daily habitual thoughts, her dominant and ruling thoughts will shape and colour their hopes and dreams. Teach your children from the first that they are to be servants of God and followers of Jesus, that they are to be, above all things, good men and women; not necessarily rich, clever, admired, but brave, honest, dutiful, Godfearing, Christ-loving. Tell them that you would rather they should fail in everything else than fail in that. Tell them that it is far better to die young than to grow up foolish, God-forgetting, and wicked. Keep that ever before them, until the thought becomes a living picture in heart and mind. Repeat it line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and verily the things will come to pass. In almost every case you will see, as Samuel's mother saw, the desire of your heart fulfilled.

II

We are told about his schoolmaster. He was the one pupil of a sad-hearted old man. There is a touch of pathos in that part of the story. This child became the one joy of a lonely house, the music in its silent chambers. He came to Eli as the sunbeams come into a prison, or the smell of flowers to a sick man on his bed. He was a joyless old man, wearied and disappointed, who trailed behind him the broken threads of all his life's hopes. His own sons had become his shame, so that he wished he had buried them when they were little ones. His country was in danger, for the people had forsaken God and all good things, and were on the downgrade towards ruin. He was a gentle and kindly old man,

but with no strength for the position which he filled. His hands were weak and his eyes dim. Dark was the outlook, and his life was going down with sorrow to the grave. And now see the goodness of the Lord. There comes into his house this sunbeam, this ripple of laughter on the sullen stream, this song in the night. A child whose feet ran in the way of his commandments, a child whom it was good to love and a joy to teach, a child who would take the place of his lost sons and provide new interests and create new hopes. There was something to live for and work for again. The child's presence brought summer into the drear winter, and warmth and cheerfulness into the cold desolate heart. On that child the old man poured his affection and gave all his remaining strength, and the child took lovely shape under these worn but tender hands. He must have been a good schoolmaster though he was no great good at anything else. It must have been his counsels and influence mainly that equipped the boy for his life's work. The Lord sent him this much of light in the evening time. We always pity the old man Eli. We think of him as a failure. He had failed as a father, as a judge and ruler, as a religious guide to the people. His life was a tangled waste of broken purposes. Yet he did one thing that was worth living for, and which almost immortalised him—he educated the coming man. He was no prophet, but he helped to make a prophet. He had no greatness of his own, but he developed the greatness of another. If Israel owed him nothing else, it owed him a Samuel, and that was no small debt. His life bore that magnificent fruit in its old age, and many a successful life has far less to show at the end. Call no man or woman a failure who has

sent out one brave true life to enrich the world. It matters not how little name or fame you have made in the world; if you have made or helped one child to become mighty in faith and rich in good works, you shall shine as the stars for ever. When you think of Samuel do not forget the gentle, tired, old man who was his schoolmaster.

III

We are told of his growth. Again and again we have it repeated in the course of the story that the child Samuel grew for the Lord was with him. And some of our young friends will say, "There was surely no need to tell us that; every child grows. Do we not all want a new coat every year like Samuel, because we have grown too big for the old one?" Yes; there is nothing remarkable about that. But there are different kinds of growth. Some children grow taller and stronger, but they do not improve in other things. They get a little more knowledge, but they do not get much wiser. They increase in stature, years, and strength; but they seem to lose, bit by bit, all their goodness, and what was beautiful in them becomes ugly, and what was kind and gentle and innocent becomes selfish and peevish and hard and unlovely. We could almost wish that some children had never grown at all; that they had just remained what they were when we first knew them. For now they are like flowers that have withered; they are like fruit from which all the sweet juices have been sucked; they have learned so much naughtiness and so little of God that their beauty is only a memory of something lost for ever.

Samuel grew in favour with God and also with man. He grew by prayer. His very name means that—asked of God; and all his life corresponded with the name. All the pictures which you see of this child represent him on his knees, and repeatedly he is spoken of in the Bible as the man who was mighty in prayer. A few verses further on we read that God let none of his words fall to the ground. God took up his prayers, and kept them and answered them. They were very simple and short, like every child's prayer. No more than just, "God help me," or "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." Sometimes he said them when he was trimming the lights or sweeping the floor of the temple, and sometimes when he was lying on his little bed. But God let none of them fall to the ground. God heard them, and for every prayer gave him a little more wisdom and a little more goodness. And so he grew in obedience, in truthfulness, in modesty, in kindness of heart, in helpfulness. And everybody saw that he was shaping well. Presently, as we are told, all Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, knew that he was going to be a prophet of the Lord. They knew that he would fight for the truth, because he always spoke the truth. They knew that he would be fit for some great work, because he never shirked his tasks as a boy. For just as we can tell from the first signs whether a tree will grow crooked or straight, and whether a plant will grow into poisonous nightshade or into a fragrant rose bush, and whether the glittering particles under the sea will form a common oyster shell or crystallise into a pearl, so can those who watch a child's life to-day know what the coming man or woman will be. Samuel was steadily shaping into the life which God had designed

for him. He grew in favour with God and also with men. And lastly we are told—

IV

That he was the rising star in a dark sky, and the hope of a godless land. It was a dreary and desperate time. The people were growing more and still more faithless and wicked. The priests, who ought to have shown them an example of goodness, were leaders in every iniquity. The very holy places had become foul and polluted like moral cesspools. There were no prophets and no teachers to rebuke sin and remind men of God and higher things. It seemed as if the river of corruption was so deep and broad and strong that every man, woman, and child would be carried away by it. The few who, like old Eli, still believed in God and righteousness were at their wits' end. They saw no tiniest rift in the black stormcloud which darkened the sky. And yet, in the midst of all that, God was training this child as a teacher and deliverer, keeping him outside all the impurity and unbelief, giving him a big heart and a wise mind, and fitting him for great leadership. He seemed to be saying to the fearful and despondent ones, "Do not lose heart; do not waste your strength in melancholy croakings. I shall have my servant ready in due time when he is most needed. Do not fear that all the great and good men are gone. I am making another; one of the greatest."

If you read these three chapters, you seem to hear two distinct voices speaking. One is a voice of groaning complaint, sad foreboding; the other, a voice of hope, promise, and good cheer. One tells of

greedy priests who were robbing the people and plundering the sanctuary; and then the other voice breaks in, "But the child Samuel grew and ministered before the Lord." Once more the doleful lips take up the strain, and tell again how the ruling men are wallowing in the filthiest sins and the people mocking at religion, and all the wisdom turned to folly; and again the other voice replies, "But the child grew on, grew in favour with God and man." Clouds thickening above, and danger and ruin threatening on every side. Still the child grows, and God is with him, strengthening his arms, enlightening his mind, inspiring him with great thoughts and a great purpose, and at last the hour comes, the man is prepared for it, the hosts of God gather round him, and the battle is fought and won and the land is saved.

And so God is training our children to-day. There are always new hopes given to us when we see child life, for in every group of children, especially if they are God-taught children, there are the bright and great possibilities of the future. In our religious homes and Sunday schools His far-seeing eyes have already marked out His Samuels, His prophets of the future, His champions in the righteous battles which are still to be fought, His good and wise men who will be leaders in all goodness. You hear to-day some of those same doleful voices which were heard in the Israel of Eli, voices lamenting that the faithful are falling and none left to take their places, that religion is being slowly swallowed up in the maw of pleasure, sport, and greed; lamenting especially that there are no leaders, no prophets, no men of genius, no men with lofty aims and grand visions, no inspired thinkers or preachers, none of those grand souls who help to make others great. We

are fallen on a degenerate age, they say, an age of small men and endless chatter of blatant lips, and the coming days are dark. Very well; whenever I hear that voice I hear also the ring of God's voice repeating its words of hope. He has His Samuels in the sanctuary to-day. He is training them in a thousand hidden places, known only to Himself. Instead of the fathers shall come up the children. When there is a dearth of great men there is often a larger abundance of young souls slowly growing into greatness. The seed has been sown and the harvest will be reaped further on. We shall have them again, never fear. The Samuels, the brave leaders, the men made mighty by faith and prayer, they are growing in many a godly home to-day. The Lord knows them though we do not. They are growing in favour with God and man. I hope we hear some of their voices in our children's songs to-day. I hope that the Lord has some of His chosen and appointed Samuels in the sweet faces that we look on in our own homes and sanctuaries.

XIV

DAVID AND ABSALOM

A FATHER'S REMORSE AND A FATHER'S FORGIVENESS

² Sam. xviii. 31-33: "O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

THE story of Absalom's rebellion is the most exciting drama in the Bible, and one of the guiltiest and saddest tragedies in human history. It is given to us in some of the most powerful word-pictures which have ever been painted. Clear, strong, and lifelike do the leading figures stand out. Absalom, with his stately form and flowing hair, his pride and courage, his sleek beauty and the cruel, tiger heart beneath it; Joab, the grim soldier, the man of blood and iron, to whom tears are weakness and pity unknown, who crushes his enemies with as little mercy and compunction as he would trample on a snake; and David, seen here at his best, recoiling from the unfeeling instrument which he is compelled to use, hardly caring for the throne which he must win back at such a price of blood, weary of life's ambitions and awful agonies, willing to resign even life itself if he might win back an erring child, and falling down broken-hearted in his lonely chamber while all Jerusalem was ringing with wild rejoicings over his victory. I know no scene in human story more pathetic than that. Throne and people, rebel and traitor, battle and trumpet, all are forgotten in the

father's pity for his boy. "O my son, my son Absalom!"

He had hoped from the first that it might be possible to carry through the lamentable struggle without this result. He was far more anxious to know what would become of Absalom than how it would all terminate for himself. He charged the troops as they marched past him, "Deal gently with the young man." Victory if possible, but above all things spare him. And he waited by the gate in an agony of suspense while the two armies far away were fighting for empire. Each hurrying messenger as he came in was asked the all-absorbing question, "Is the young man safe?" And when Cushi, with unfeeling bluntness, told the awful truth, it was as if something had snapped in the old man's heart and the whole world become dark and gravelike. He can think of nothing but the son long loved, the boy who had been his pride in bygone years, and the bright hopes which had been built on that gifted young life; and now he pictures him lying buried and dead in the wood of Ephraim, buried with unexpiated guilt upon his soul. "O my son, Absalom! would God I had died for thee!" Now one is almost afraid to touch such grief as that and to probe with too curious hands this father's wounded heart; and yet I may be forgiven for saying that there was something in it which only a sinning man could feel—an element of guilty self-reproach; and there was something also well-nigh divine, which helps us to understand the fatherly heart of God.

I

In this cry of anguish there was the torture of self-accusation. The sting of death is sin. The

sting of that death to David was Absalom's sin, and alas! his own sin too. If you recall things which had happened in David's life years before, you will have no doubt that the remembrance of his own misdoings testified against him now, and he saw in that tragedy, in part at least, the harvest for which he had done the sowing. Nathan, the prophet, had come to him in the hour of his transgression and predicted almost this very thing, that the sword should never depart from his house, and that out of his own household would come his torturing cross and shame. How could it be otherwise? He had violated the domestic sanctities, taken another man's wife, and sent that man to his death. With the coming of Bathsheba there came into his home strife, hatred, and division. It is a terrible picture of family life; perpetual quarrels and sometimes bloodshed. It was the old story of favouritism and jealousy. Bathsheba's child, Solomon, was the favoured one, and seemed likely to be chosen David's successor. Absalom plunged into rebellion, not merely through ambition, but because he feared that the succession was slipping away from him. We can see the whole plot working itself out. We can see the whole household rioting in sin, and David had no power to stop it. His hand was paralysed, for had not he himself been the first and chief transgressor? He had sowed the wind and now the whirlwind was upon him. And he knew and felt it when he cried, "O Absalom, my son! would God I had died for thee!"

We never know what the end of a sin may be. We never know how far the consequences will reach, or whom they will affect. We cannot whitewash the black pages by repenting of the deeds. David had repented in sackcloth and ashes. He had been forgiven. But there in his children were the deadly

fruits, and he would rather have laid down his life than brought this evil upon them. There are things which God forgives us, but which we can never forgive ourselves. If our children go wrong when we have done our very best for them, when we have prayed for them continually, and watched over them with anxious love, and set before them an example of integrity, and talked to them when rising up and when lying down of the good and better things; if they go wrong then, as they sometimes do, it is a heart-aching burden, a bleeding thorn in the flesh. But there is no torture in it. We can commit them to God through our tears, and with easy consciences trust Him still on their behalf. But when they go wrong and we feel that our own training and example are partly responsible for it, that our ill temper turned them crooked, that our self-indulgences provoked their passion, or that our unworthy Christian lives set them against the Christian faith, then we feel like David, and our punishment is greater than we can bear. There is no misfortune that is crushing unless some memory of guilt is behind it. The poet says, "A sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things." Nothing of the kind. A sorrow's crown of sorrow is the feeling that we have brought it on ourselves. I do not care what hard times come to you in after years, what disappointments and failures you may have to meet, what crosses with their thorns and nails you may have to carry; if they are not deliberately self-wrought by some present misdoings, neglects, dishonesties, pernicious indulgences in forbidden things, if they come upon you through pure misfortune or the evil doings of others, you can bear them. Yes; God helping you, with a cheerful heart. But if you know that they are the inevitable outcome

of your wild God-defying doings in years gone by, then will the sting of them be awful, then will you feel as David felt when he cried, "O Absalom, my son, my son: would God I had died for thee!" And now I pass most gladly from this darker aspect of the grief to its diviner side.

II

We may take it, yes without irreverence, as a type or human picture of the Divine Fatherhood and of its unlimited forgiveness. David is called the man after God's own heart, and that word staggers us when we remember some of his doings. But the word does not come amiss here. We feel that it is true in such scenes as this. Kneeling in his chamber and uttering that impassioned cry of pity, burning love, and forgiveness, we can see indeed something of God's own heart. In this great tribulation he is as one washed and made white, and his face is like the tearful Christ's, Godlike. His love for this guilty, iron-hearted son was passing strange; it was almost more than human. It was a love which gave a kiss for every blow, turned a forgiving face to every insult and stripe, and prayed for the criminal who was crucifying it. Through all the suffering and shame which Absalom's revolt had brought upon him, through all the infamous treachery, he clung with fond affection to the boy, the man who was still his child in spite of all. Ugly in his cruelty, hateful in his falsehood, he was still beautiful in his father's eyes. He had done every mean and dastardly thing, schemed and conspired like a very devil against his father, driven him from his house, robbed him of his friends, sought his life, and would have trampled

with fury on his corpse. Yet through all this David's one thought was to woo and win back his boy, to restore him to the old place, to heap forgiveness on his crimes and cover them all with great waters of love as the sea hides its secrets and its dead. He clings to him now with a broken heart, wishing he could lay down his weary head and die if that would bring the lost one back. Oh ! for another good look on the boy's face, and to clasp him in his arms again and tell him that all is forgiven ! He flings beseeching arms through the very gates of death, and holds him fast there, as if he would save him still, in spite of death. It is as near an approach to prayer for the dead as the Bible contains. He feels as if he would like to go after him into the dark fields beyond, and save him there if he might be saved. "O Absalom, my son, my son : would God I could die for thee ! "

All this is what we rightly call divine. It is a broken light of God. It is the image of His Fatherhood. All worthy fathers and mothers have something of it. What wrongs can entirely alienate and destroy a father's love ? What insults can turn a mother obstinately against her child ? What shame resting on our children's faces can make us hide our faces from theirs ? From what wanderings would we not fetch them back ? Into what pit would we not descend to fetch them up and wash them clean ? What iniquities would repel us if they returned with tears of penitence and asked us to take them into our arms again ? And when do we ever cease hoping and striving to redeem them when they have fallen ? Death itself can hardly stop us from praying for them, though they have died in very sin. A mother almost, in spite of her Protestant faith, will stretch out her hands to God and implore Him still to save them

beyond the grave. We all have it in a measure if dear children have been given to us. We call it natural affection. No; that is a poor word. It is supernatural affection. It is the gift of God. It is a part of Himself. He makes every forgiving father's heart and every gentle mother's heart a picture of His own, that we may have constantly before us something to remind us of what He is. And if there is a little of it in us, there is far more of it in Him. David weeping over his lost son was not more compassionate than God but less compassionate. The beam of light is less intense than the great burning orb from which it comes. The furnace is more than the spark which it flings out. God is greater than our heart, and His love more unwearying. David said, "Would God I had died for thee"; but God says, "Through Jesus I did die for thee."

And through Jesus we preach to every one a fatherly God, a tearful God, a cross-bearing God, a God whose pity is beyond all our measurement, whose forgiveness is greater than man's greatest sin. We preach One who holds on to you to the last, whose eye follows you through all your wanderings, whose forbearance you cannot wear out with all your contempts and slights, whose forgiveness is kept waiting for you though ten thousand times you have spurned it, who pleads with you to the very end—"How can I give thee up?" And surely we may say that these words are not David's words alone. They are the voice speaking through him to every impenitent and unbelieving man. They are the very cry which came to us all from the Cross, "O Absalom, my son, my son: would God I had died for thee!"

XV

DAVID

THE REAL GREATNESS OF MAN

2 Sam. xxii. 36: "Thou hast also given me the shield of thy salvation ; and thy gentleness hath made me great."

DAVID spake unto the Lord the words of this song on the day when he had emerged victorious from all his struggles. That is the account which the psalm gives of itself in the opening verse, and so far as I know no Bible critic has ventured to challenge this statement or dispute the authorship. It is the story of a life written and set to music by the man who lived it. It is not a piping song of peace, green pastures, and still waters, like some of those tenderer lyrics which came from the same pen. It deals with rougher and fiercer scenes, and resounds with the clash of arms and noise of battle. It is the autobiography of one who had been a man of war from his youth up, and had had to march through the fields of blood to every position which he had gained. And in that respect there are some things in it which jar with our finer Christian sentiments. Yet in its modest estimate of his own unworthy part in the business, in its profound recognition of the undeserved love which had mightily helped, made, and raised him, it is fit to be put in the front rank of Christian hymns. It is such a song as St. Paul might have sung, and did sing, when, on the eve of martyrdom, he looked back on his ministry ; such a song

as every Christian would wish to raise when life's little day is near its close, and he is waiting in the shadows for another and fairer morning. Throughout it is an outpouring of lowly and rejoicing gratitude. He throws a rapid glance backward over the whole strange and startling drama of his career from the sheepfold to the throne; through all the dark and dreary days, the bleeding agonies, the terrible fears, the desperate adventures, the miraculous escapes, the unexpected salutations, the crowning victories. He surveys it all in the spirit of one who cannot kneel too low, in language from which every accent of boasting is excluded. It is not by dint of human genius, or foresight, or pushfulness that all these foes and difficulties have been overcome, but by the guiding, preventing, long-suffering mercy of the Almighty. "God has been my strength and power. Thou hast also given me the shield of Thy salvation, and Thy gentleness hath made me great."

Now these are the words of every man who takes a truthful reading of the facts of life, who views his life's doings and gains in the searching light of God. The great mind always clothes itself in humility, because it takes a true estimate of self, and disdains to walk in a vain show. David was a modest gentleman simply because he was not a blind, self-deceiving fool. That expresses briefly the whole situation. He was a great man, as we ordinarily use that word. He was unquestionably great. Few of the historical figures of the world have been formed in a bigger mould. In spite of his sins, awful blunders, and moral falls, he stands out in huge bulk as one of the world's master minds; a far-seeing statesman, a gifted thinker and poet, a brilliant soldier, a man of charming personality and winsome attractiveness, a

man of infinite patience and unwearying energy, and every inch a king. If he had been a vain man, what a loud story he would have told of his own mighty doings and conquest of difficulties; how loftily he would have carried himself among his throngs of courtiers and flatterers. "Look at me what I have been and done, self-made, self-raised, the builder of a kingdom, the hero of a hundred fights, the sweet singer of Israel! I am mountains high above you all!" But if he had either said or felt the least breath or whisper of all that, he would have been another man and not the David whom the world admires and God loved. He knew, as all such men know, that their gifts and powers and energies are not of their own creation. If there is genius it is heaven-born, not self-wrought. If there is the weighty brain and the keen, far-reaching vision and the indomitable will, they are talents bestowed upon us unasked for, and not digged and coined by our own hands. If your stature is six feet are you to look down with supercilious disdain upon that other piece of humanity which is six inches lower, as if you yourself had manufactured the extra six inches? If you have had a brilliant career and succeeded in everything to which you have set your hands, are you to strut about as a little god, forgetting whence came all the powers and gifts of fortune which carried you to victory? A man of David's build knows better than this, because his eyes are opened. He is content to drop upon his knees and confess, "By the grace of God I am what I am. Thou hast given me the shield of Thy salvation, and Thy gentleness hath made me great."

The Bible has the greatest contempt for self-important people. Think how it lashes them with

the whip of scorn. Its Pharaohs in their Egyptian palaces; its Rabshakehs with their insolent bravado, boasting as if all the world belonged to them, and as if they could defy omnipotence; its Nebuchadnezzars walking about Babylon and calling upon all men to behold the grandeur of their doings and the majesty of their wisdom; its Herods arrayed in gorgeous robes and flaunting themselves in unholy pride as if they sat on the throne of God. How the Bible scouts and flouts and scorns these marionettes that dance for a moment on the world's tawdry stage and mouth inflated speeches as if they were hardly less than the Almighty; these men who boast, "By mine own might and the power of mine own hand I have done and gotten me all these things"! The Bible flings them out with a sort of pitying scorn, and treads them down as the small dust under one's feet. There is no sin more fiercely condemned in its pages than the sin of the uplifted look and the haughty eye. We read again and again that God had them in derision. He that sitteth in the heavens laughs at the airs of men who talk as if they filled the world, when in fact there is hardly enough of them to fill a grave. And truly if there is any laughter in heaven it must be provoked by that. It is all so small and foolish, so empty and so tinselled. It is the comedy of a vain show. It is the humour of an enormous exaggeration. For life is always a poor thing if we measure it by what we ourselves have been and done. The young may be forgiven if they are sometimes betrayed into a sense of self-importance. To an older man it is the unpardonable sin, because the experience of his life ought to have shown him the folly and the falsehood of it all. He has blundered so often, and failed so often, and had so many thorns in the flesh to

rebuke his pride, and received so many humbling reminders that the world can get on just as well without him, that if he has not learned to walk lowly it is because he has neither mind nor heart enough to learn anything well.

The saints of God were always like David in this one thing. There is not a man in the Bible story worth reading of who was not stamped with this characteristic feature. They had a hundred faults, but the sin of over-estimating their importance was never one of them. They had measured themselves not with human tape-lines, but with God's larger rule. And this was the language in which they all wrote the story of their lives—"I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies which the Lord my God has bestowed upon me. Thou hast given me the shield of Thy salvation, and Thy gentleness hath made me great."

And in that word we are told the secret of all that is truly great in man. David the king, the poet, the soldier, the genius, in that word just kneels down, strips himself of all those special gifts and distinctions which make a man bulk large in the eyes of his fellow-men, and take his place with the rest of us, saying, "If we have any greatness at all, it is the gentleness of God that gives it to us." The gentleness of God: what is it? It is almost indefinable, but something which the heart can feel and understand. The gentleness of man is the most winsome of human attributes. It is strength forgetting its strength and becoming tender as a kiss and soft as a sunbeam. You see it in the old oft-told story of Hector, the Trojan warrior, doffing the helmet which frightens the child, and stooping down with smiling face and velvet touch to caress and bless the child. You see

it in the soldier with iron arm and mighty heart kneeling over the feeblest wounded thing and soothing it with touches soft and tearful as a child's. You see it in the mother's face as she bends over her sick and helpless infant. You see it more than all in the picture of Christ's healing ministry when He lays His mighty hand, soothing and calming, upon the diseases and sicknesses of men. There is always something of unconscious stooping and condescension in it; something very high, and perhaps mighty, that puts off its mightiness to help and bless. That is human gentleness, and that is the gentleness of God, which makes us great. For all the dignity of human life and all the grandeur of which it dares to boast is in its relationship to an almighty, tender-hearted, and infinitely lowly God. The thought that He who holds the mountains and the oceans in the hollow of His hand, and tosses out the stars as so much golden spray, takes into His hand also the palpitating heart and trembling life of man and makes them His own care, that is the thought which exalts us. The belief that He whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain stoops to plead with each human spirit, and even to enter and dwell there as a familiar friend, that is our title to greatness if we have one; that is what makes us great. As a father pitieith his children, so the Lord pitieith us. As a nurse tends her wounded, so He stoops over us. As a mother is the soul of gentleness to her little one, so the Almighty is to every trembling spirit that cries to Him. In that King David found his greatness, and there every man finds it who reads aright the facts of life and eternity. For there is indeed nothing to boast of unless you can boast of your indestructible relationship to Him who made you, who keeps you in life

and death, and whose you must be for ever. Apart from that, your social position is but a thing of straw, your earthly honours no more substantial than a paper crown, your utmost wealth a trick of imagination which will dissolve and vanish in the hour of death if not before, your cleverness and genius only like a torch-light which burns out in an hour.

Infinitely more than all this to you is the fact that God is lowly enough to think of you, to care for you, to follow you with watchful eyes, to take any trouble with you at all. If we possessed the whole world, if we had each the genius of a Shakespeare or Milton or David, it would not give us as much right to exalt ourselves as the simple fact that we can pray to God, that it is not a waste of words, a flinging out of something into the dark, a piece of self-deceiving, but that prayer is a reality, the real talk of a real man with a real Almighty God. Think of it! It almost transcends thought. The wonder of it is unspeakable. We spend our lives in winning some great place and name, we wear out nerve and brain to make ourselves of some consequence in the world, and lo! the highest place that we can ever reach is the place of God's footstool, where each one of us at any time can kneel in prayer. For unless prayer be the greatest farce and mockery in human life, it is its noblest distinction and its grandest elevation. It is the lowliness of God as He listens to our cries and deigns to answer them that makes us great.

And our greatness, if we have any, is in the fact that He thinks us worth caring for, worth teaching and training and leading on to all goodness that we may dwell with Him and enjoy Him for ever. It is the mercy of our God that makes us great, the everlasting forgiveness which one never wears out, the patience

with us that never fails, and the love that never turns away. We seem so little deserving of it all. There are times when we despise ourselves, when we are utterly ashamed of ourselves, and we ask—"Can it be true that God has any kindly feelings left for us? Why should He cling to us in this way, and forgive for ever and for ever?" We do not understand it; and yet there it is if the Bible words are true. And that is what makes us great, nothing else. The thought which David expressed here, though he did not know it, was all wrapped up in the great fact of the incarnation. It was expressed in its divinest and completest form in that mystery of mysteries, God manifest in the flesh. There was the gentleness of God in its supreme beauty, the gentleness which enshrined itself in flesh to come near to us, and stooped to shame and death that it might save.

And we are only poor and purblind fools if we make our glorying in anything but that. There is no dignity for us save that which is conferred by Christ's humanity and our part in His divine exaltation. There is nothing to boast of save the cross and the forgiving heart of God which it reveals, and the immortal hope which it makes to shine on our path. These things are our promotion. These things should ever keep us humble, grateful, and reverently glad. "Thou hast also given me the shield of Thy salvation, and Thy gentleness hath made me great."

XVI

DAVID

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

2 Sam. xxiii. 15 : "And David longed, and said, O that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate !"

IT would be an insult to your intelligence to say that this is a charming and delightful story. You feel that at once if you have the least bit of imagination. It is the sweetest thing in David's life. There is real poetry in it. There is more than a touch of romance, and it is a picture of heroism, too, which stirs one and well-nigh fetches tears. The incident belongs to that period in David's life when he was an outlaw, when Saul was hunting him and he was hiding with his ragged followers in various mountains and caves. This day they had tramped long and far. He was tired, spent, burning with thirst, and there was no water to be had. But they were not far from Bethlehem, the place of his childhood, and he remembered the well there close by the gate. He was not likely to forget that he had played about it and drunk of it hundreds of times in those sweet bygone days. It was just across the valley, half a mile or so, yet inaccessible, for between him and the well his enemies were encamped. No breaking through them. And he cried out in half-despairing tones, never dreaming that any one would attend to his request, "O that one would give me to drink of

the water of the well of Bethlehem!" He thought of the days when he drank of it without hindrance, and now there was that impassable barrier in the way. And is it not likely that he thought of other things besides that water? The well of Bethlehem surely reminded him of the early days, with all their glad, free, innocent ways, when he was a simple-hearted, Godfearing child, knowing little of evil and nothing of fighting and sorrow and life's rough work. And there was another army between him and those days which no power could break through. His hands had shed blood, his heart had been torn with fierce passions. It was not as in the olden days. He had lost much. He had gained much also, as we shall see, but it was the loss that he thought of now. And it was not only his lips that thirsted, but his heart that was thirsting for the blessed days of long ago when he cried, "O that one would give me to drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" And now there is surely something here which appeals to our own memories, touching the grown-up man in us, and speaking also to the child in us, if there is anything of the child left.

I

First, there are times in every life when we are reminded of the well of Bethlehem, and wish in vain that we could drink of that well again. A children's anniversary always brings one of these times to grown-up people. I mean times when our thoughts are carried back to early days, and we almost sigh as David did because we cannot cross over to them again. There is no man or woman who does not say

occasionally or feel with Job, "O that it were with me as in days that are past!" We have visions of happy wells of which we drank in the dear young days, and from which we are now separated by a barrier of years and other things. We think of the time when everything was new to us and the world cramfull of glory, when perfect health was in our veins, and our heart-beats were all music, and we had no heavy burden of care to carry, and sorrow had not brought the shadows, and we hardly knew what it was to be weary, and no day was ever too long, and we wanted no heaven beyond because it was all heaven below. That is how we once felt. That is how all young happy hearts feel to-day. Thank God for it; may they feel like that for a long time to come! And as we look on them we almost catch ourselves saying, "How beautiful if I could be a child again just for to-night!"

And there are other things which we should like to return to if it were in any way possible—the leisure, the golden opportunities, the school days and the wells of knowledge, the hours which we thought so little of and for the most part wasted when we had them, the books we might have read, the things we might have learned, the fitness for life's work we might have gained. Most of us would be glad to have those chances repeated. We always find out the value of them when they have taken their departure. We half despised them then, and we pay for it now. We are not quite so wise or so thoughtful as we might have been. Our hearts often say, "It is a pity that a man cannot have another try!" And there are few who do not occasionally sigh for those wells by the gate of Bethlehem.

And we have all longings and regrets sadder than

these. All of us, I say, though some have reason to feel them more than others. Certain other things have left us which the child had, and which most children have yet—a certain stock of happy innocence and purity and simple faith. There were days when we knew little of evil; when we had no thought which we wished to hide; when our feet had not been in any crooked ways; when our minds were not defiled; when no chains of habit held us bound, and no fierce passions within drove us to wrongdoing; when we had no craving for gold or power or strong drink or worse things, and no envy, malice, and bitter discontent; when we hardly knew at all the meaning of those words, "The world, the flesh, and the devil." The gates are shut upon all that now. It was our Garden of Eden, and the angel with the flaming sword stops our return. This is what we mean by the wells of Bethlehem. Or, as Tennyson expresses it—

"The tender grace of a day that is dead
Will never come back to me."

We are always saying or thinking that if we could live life over again we would make a better thing of it. Perhaps we should. We certainly should if we could begin it with all the lessons we have learned, but that would not be beginning it at all. It is just as likely that if we had a second entirely new trial we should for the most part tread the same ground and commit the same blunders, and be precisely the same fools that we have been. And in any case, there is no good sighing for those wells, for they are gone, and there is no getting back to them. And the best way to prove that we would do better if they were given to us again is to begin, by God's help, doing better now; and so enough said about that cry, though

many a time still it will escape our lips. "O that one would give me to drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!"

II

We are reminded by this story that there are better things in life than the well of Bethlehem. David here was crying for his vanished childhood, and in a moment certain things happened which proved to him that he was richer as a man than he had ever been as a child. For one thing, he had won friendships that were faithful to him even unto death. Three men among his followers, as soon as they heard his cry, went off without a moment's doubt to obey; broke through an army, their lives hanging by a hair at every turn, on the mere chance of bringing him a draught. It was surely more than all the delights of childhood, to have gained such devotion, such love as that! And he himself, with all his sins and failings, showed his true nobility there. His thirst was torturing him. A cup of water was worth a kingdom, but when these brave men brought it to him he could not, would not drink it. No; won at so great a peril, it would be like drinking the blood of these men. "I cannot do this," he said, and he poured the water on the ground. Self-sacrifice of that kind, beautiful and heroic deeds of that kind, are better than the sweet innocence of childhood. They are more Godlike. We feel that the David who could act in this way, the David with all those loyal hearts holding on to him, we feel that this man, scarred and rugged, and with all his sinful memories, was a far grander figure than the minstrel boy who dipped his hands in the waters of Bethlehem. He

had gained much, though he had lost much. I think he had gained more than he had lost, and I would fain believe that is true of most of us. There are better things than the glory of childhood, just as the gnarled, strong, winter-worn oak is nobler than the slender sapling with its first shoots of green. God did not send us into the world to be always children, but to be strong, long-suffering, serviceable men and women; to make friends and deserve their friendship; to learn patience through sorrow and courage, by facing difficulties, and take a real soldier's part in the great battle of life. And if we are doing that in a measure there is no need to sigh for our Bethlehem days. A man, if he has grown with some sense of duty, with some fear of God, and in a religious way; if he has fought with temptation and not always yielded; if he has learned some of the finer lessons which experience teaches, is in all ways richer than he was as a youth or a little child. His thoughts are larger and wiser; his whole conception of things is more Godlike; his sympathies are wider; his world is a bigger place. He loves and pities his fellow-men more; his hands and brain and heart are fitter for work; his influence is greater; and the world which thanks God for the children ought to thank God even more for him. If you have lived religiously at all, your religion is a far grander and truer thing than it was long years ago. You know more of the goodness of God; you have proved His helpfulness in many an hour of trial; your faith is more deeply rooted, for it has been tried by many a storm, and your sense of God's forgiveness is much keener and stronger because you have needed it so often in your failings and sins. And better than all if you have kept the great hopes which God gives to a man.

Oh ! yes, that is the best of all. It is very touching and beautiful to see the faith of a child who believes all things and hopes all things, who sees the future painted with gold and glory because he has never yet known grievous disappointments ; but I think it is even more beautiful to see a man or woman holding on to God firmly and trustfully after all the shakings, saying confidently, in spite of all the rough work and strain, "I believe with all my heart in God and God's dear love," and feeling always that the sky beyond is bright because the promise cannot fail. I would not exchange that for anything which the child knows. No ; the life of a godly man who has fought an honest fight and kept the faith is better than the wells of Bethlehem.

Ah ! yes ; but supposing it be the other way. Suppose you have lost all the best that was in the child and not gained any of the best things that make the man. You have sinned as David sinned, and not repented as David repented. You have lost purity as he lost it, and have not gained as he did in moral strength. You have given up the prayers of your childhood ; you have forgotten most of the religious lessons you learned ; you have no faith left. God is far away from you. You cannot sing from the heart the songs which the children have been singing to-day. You do not believe in Jesus' love ; your heart has been hardened ; there are the chains of evil habits about your lives ; you hardly believe in a world beyond, and you have no hope concerning it. Well then, I pity you. Life has been all loss for you, and I can hear you saying, with an exceedingly bitter cry, "O that it could come back again ! If I could only drink once more of that well of Bethlehem by the gate !" Is it altogether a vain cry ? No ; thank

God. There is always water for such lips as yours waiting to the last; waters of repentance, waters of cleansing, waters of forgiveness, wells of God's love, and wells of renewed hope. It was for you, as for all of us, that Christ, far mightier than those three brave men, faced death and the cross and the grave that He might with His own blood bring healing and life. He is always saying to you, "Return! come! drink of divine forgiveness, take of the wells of salvation." He says it through my lips. He says it far more pleadingly through the lips of the children to-day. Through them He invites you, through them He sounds His promises. Many a one on these anniversary days is reminded of the wells of Bethlehem, and in thinking of them is brought to that Saviour who was born in Bethlehem.

XVII

HADAD

PATRIOTISM

(Preached on returning from Australia).

1 Kings xi. 22 : "But what hast thou lacked with me, that thou seekest to go into thine own country ? And he answered : I have lacked nothing, howbeit let me go in any wise."

I SHOULD think it very likely that this little story is a stranger to most of you ; unnoticed, or, perhaps, if once read, forgotten. It is woven into another story, and half hidden in a long chapter which is not very fascinating or edifying. No wonder that we have passed it over. Yet it has a certain charm which makes it worth telling. The man who figures in it was a certain Edomite named Hadad. It is not a pretty or romantic name, to our ears at least. One could wish he had been called something else ; but there was a good deal of romance in his life. His early years had known hard times, sorrow, and tragedy. He had been made a homeless orphan amid the horror and bloodshed of a merciless war, and driven from his own land whilst yet a child, leaving death and desolation behind. In the company of other and forlorn fugitives he found his way to Egypt, that place where a diviner Child found refuge a thousand years later. And there he had grown up to man's estate, and grown in favour with man, and perhaps with God also. For things had gone well with him in the land of the stranger. The king had

chosen him for high preferment, married him to a princess, and endowed him with rich estates. He had found a good place, and there was every reason why he should keep it. Egypt was the wealthiest of all countries, the advanced post of culture, civilisation, and luxury, while Edom, the land of his birth, was little more than a group of barren hills, a hungry and despised land, tenanted by rude and ragged shepherds. Why could he not be content with the grand fortune which had fallen to his lot? "What hast thou lacked with me," said the king, "that thou seekest to go back to thine own country?" No; he had lacked nothing. Everything possible had been done to give him a royal welcome and a sumptuous home in the stranger's land, and he could assign no reason for quitting it. It was only a sentiment, an idea, a bit of home-sickness; a foolish, unsubstantial, romantic whim some would have called it. But it drew him like strong chains. It was irresistible. Edom, after all, was his own land—the land of his birth and childhood, on which his eyes had first opened on the golden morning, the land of kindred friends, and the graves of his fathers; his own land, which was more to him than all others. "Howbeit, let me go in any wise."

I

That is the story. That is the whole of it, and the man of whom it is told was a heathen. There is no moral or religious lesson appended to it. Yet the inspired writers thought that it deserved a place in the Bible, and have given it a permanent place there, because the sentiment which it illustrates is

beautiful, because the affection for one's own land and people is only less religious than one's reverence for God. "Howbeit, let me go in any wise." That is what some scoffers would call a woman's reason, which is devoid of reason. But, after all, these reasons which we cannot put into logical form, these sentiments and preferences and attachments which we cannot explain, are often the most powerful of all, and make the noblest and richest part of life. Why should the place where you were born, and the scenes in which your early life were passed possess a peculiar charm above all others? You cannot tell, but you would feel that some sweet human instinct were wanting in you if it were not so. Why do you sing with such pathetic fondness of the days of auld lang syne, and drink many a cup of kindness to the memory of those you knew in the far-off years? No reason for it which you can tell, but a thousand reasons which you can feel. Why does the humble cottage in which you have made a home seem far richer to you than the grand mansion in the suburbs which belongs to another? Nay, why are your own wife and children more to you than all other women and other people's darlings? It is absurd; other men's wives are just as good as yours, only you do not think so, and if you did you would deserve to be pitied or horsewhipped. You cannot explain these things, yet they are the sweetest of human realities. There is a deep vein of religion in them all; there is something spiritual, there is a touch of the divine, and they do more to fill out life and make it winsome and lovely than all our other treasures and possessions. Thank God, we are not made wholly of bone, muscle, nerve, and brain, goods, and gold bags, and clothes, but of memories, and affections, and associations, and soul,

and passion, and thoughts sweeter than kisses, and poetry without words, and music that cannot be uttered. We are made up of such things as Hadad felt when he said, "I cannot explain it; howbeit, let me go in any wise"; and if we were not made up in that way we might as well be beasts on God's earth, with no belief in unseen things and no foretaste of a heaven beyond.

II

Now, I have met this man Hadad everywhere in my journeyings through the English-speaking world; the very same man, though not an Edomite or a heathen, but British born. There he is in Egypt, in Ceylon, in Australia, in New Zealand, always speaking with tender accents of the old land, always hungry with a longing to see its white cliffs and its green meadows again. They are all like that. Though their bodies are twelve thousand miles away, the half, and sometimes the better half, of their hearts is here. The affection of our colonial kinsmen for the dear old country is wonderfully deep and strong, and even pathetic beyond words. They are more British than we are. Their patriotism is a burning fire, compared with which some of ours is lukewarm. The word "Home" has got a new meaning on their lips; they do not use it of the place of their abode, but of the land where they spent their childhood, and where, if it might please God, they would like to die. It is always home; I never heard them call it by any other name. Old men who have been parted from it since the days of infancy, and young men whose feet have never touched its streets and fields, alike

speak of it as home. They are proud of their more noble cities and fertile lands, their soil abounding in wealth, their mines of gold, their magnificent mountains, forests, lakes, and seas; they speak with glowing eyes of the wonderful future which is awaiting these lands; they think, and justly so, that they have fallen upon a goodly heritage; most of them have prospered or at least are better off in worldly goods than they would have been at home. Still they always come back to this, that there is no land quite like the old land. The men who are far on in years, if they pray at all, pray every day that they may visit the dear familiar places once again before they die, and the young are waiting for the time when they shall have leisure and money enough to make the longed-for journey. It is almost a religion with them. It is something strong as death. In all their talk you can hear in undertones this word of the Edomite, "No, there is nothing lacking here, nothing; howbeit, let me go in any wise!" And whilst that feeling endures, no power on earth can break the bonds which unite the Motherland and her children.

III

And now I come back to you stronger in the feeling about my own land which this man cherished and expressed. To see other lands does not make you love your own less but rather more. At every step of my journeys I have felt the words leaping to my lips which the exiled Jews in Babylon spoke of Jerusalem, "If I forget thee, O England, let my right hand forget its cunning, if I remember not thee above my chief joy." You need to follow the track in which my travels have taken me to realise the possessions

and power and world-wide influence for good with which God has entrusted the people of this little island. You read about the extent of our Empire, and the vast numbers of races and men that submit to our rule. But words and figures give you but a faint idea. The truth is brought home to you as you voyage half round the world, twelve thousand miles, from Naples, in Italy, to Dunedin, in New Zealand, and find that at every port of call the English flag is floating; that all the shores you skirt, whether peopled by Mohammedan, Hindoo, Buddhist, or British, are in a sense our own shores, and that you never get away from the sound of our own familiar tongue. It is wonderful that a land so small as ours, so small that you could cut an equal space out of Australia without making any appreciable difference; it is wonderful that this island, so insignificant in territory, has stretched itself out so far in name and leading and influence. It is not a thing to boast about. A higher power than ours has brought it about. It is a thing to make us humbly grateful. It is a solemn and tremendous responsibility put upon us. It is a thing to make us pray continually that we may be made deserving in righteousness and religious strength of the great burden and the honour. And the thought of it makes one cling with deeper and deeper affection to his own dear land.

And, apart from this, you feel, after journeying here, there, and everywhere, that there is no place better worth living in than this. Ceylon is more beautiful. No language can do justice to that pearl of the ocean, as they call it. Words cannot describe its grandeur in mountain, valley, waterfall, and sky. Its wealth of foliage and flower surpasses all imagination, and a journey through the island is one long succession of fairy scenes, of enchanting pictures, all

done in living colours and green. But do not forget the intolerable heat which makes life a weariness, and the dew which steeps you in chilling moisture at night, and the absence of our gentle twilight, and the fierce bloodsucking insects which infest the grass, and the venomous spiders and scorpions and cobras which are never far away. Give me England, even in the dead winter, and a thousand times more when springtime comes, than all that oppressive heat and lusciousness everlasting. Grand are the forests of Australia, but there is no bushy leafage and shade in the trees. I longed to see them and the meadows dressed in English green, for there is no verdure so fresh and varied as our own. New Zealand has all the magnificence of Norway and Switzerland, a sky like that of Italy, and sunshine to bathe in; but there is nothing quite so refreshing as our long stretches of meadow sprinkled with field flowers and dotted with noble trees. I think that taking it all in all I would rather have our climate and all its fogs and biting winds than any other. I have made a vow that I will not complain and groan and fret about our weather any more, and I would advise you to do the same. You do not know what thanks you owe to God in this respect even. I have not come back to our own land with a feeling that it is perfect and better in all respects than the other lands which I have seen; only a blind and intensely self-conceited person would do that. There are things in the colonies which I would fain see here and do not. There are hateful and distressing things here which are absent there. There one sees no extreme poverty, and very little of the degradation and revolting vice which that brings. There is not so much drunkenness visible. There are fewer prisons and

almshouses, and far fewer people that need them. Goods are more equally distributed, labour is more respected and better paid. There is none of the snobbishness which looks down upon the man who works with his hands. There is more freedom of intercourse, more friendliness, more open hospitality, and I think even more brotherly love. There are fewer class distinctions, and what there are are not made so mightily much of as they are with us. Man is weighed by himself and not by his birth and possessions, and there is more of real fellowship and equality in the worship and communion of the Churches. It has done me good to see these things. They are all the finest elements of practical Christianity, and I wish it were in my power to introduce them into our English life for the enrichment of it.

Our own land is, and ought to be, the dearest of all. There is none like it, and yet God knows it might be made a great deal better and more worthy of our love. And to bring about that, to cast out all glaring evils, our social and national sins, to cleanse our towns from all their moral corruptions and save the people from their impurities, prides, sinful frivolities, and contempt of higher things, that is the chief aim and prayer of every one who truly loves his country. That is the best and highest form of patriotism. It is the only patriotism which God can fully approve in these Christian days. It is the work of every Church. It is a work which I myself am called to do, and to which I invite more urgently and earnestly all of you. May God mightily help us, for the work is great. It cannot be done by slack or feeble hands. May God give us all joy in doing it, and afterwards the meed and praise of those who have done it well. Amen.

XVIII

ELIJAH

THE PROPHET WHO LEARNED A LESSON OF FAITH FROM A HEATHEN WOMAN

I Kings xvii. 9 : "Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there : behold, I have commanded a widow woman to sustain thee."

THESE words are followed by one of the most homely and heart-moving of Bible stories. There is only one book that would have told such a story in such a place. The writer stops the march of great events to open a cottage door and show us a picture of humblest life. He is describing a great prophet's career. He is giving an account of the tremendous conflict between God's truth and heathen darkness in which that prophet was mightily engaged, and on which the whole future of a nation depended, and he weaves into it this pathetic incident in the life of a poor, lone widow. The Bible is always surprising us in that way. It passes from kings and prophets and national movements to the humblest lives and the most insignificant scenes as if they were of equal importance in the eyes of God. The sorrows of Hagar, the outcast slave, find a place in the history of the grand patriarch Abraham. The simple story of Ruth, the Moabite, appears amid all the great wars of Joshua and Gideon and Samson. The sweet tragedy of the Shunamite mother and her child is brought into the magnificent career of Elisha. We are taken from the grand to the little, from royal

palace to meagre cottage, from epoch-making events to the joys and sorrows of a single obscure life, as if there was no descent from the one to the other, as if they had the same large place in the eternal love and care. This, indeed, is what makes the Bible so peculiarly God's message of comfort to each one of us. It reminds us in every page that God is mighty, and therefore despiseth not anything. He follows the great ones of the earth, but never forgets the least. He guides the course of nations and holds up each feeble trembling heart. All souls are His alike; the little Hebrew maid and her master, Naaman; the forgotten slave and the crowned king; the prophet moulding a nation's life, and the widow cooking her last meal before she dies. All this makes us feel that the great God is our God, that there is no respect of persons with Him, and that however small a place we fill in the world we are never left out of His all-embracing care and sympathy.

It is worth remembering that this story of the widow is the only incident in Elijah's ministry to which our Saviour made reference. To Him it seemed the most noteworthy and the most beautiful thing in that stormy and majestic career, because it proved to Elijah and to all who read it that a solitary heathen woman was as dear and near to God as His sheep of the house of Israel.

Now look at the story on its two sides—the prophet's side and the woman's, and God's loving kindness to both of them.

I

Think of it first as the rebuke of faithless fear and despair. Elijah was in one of his gloomy moods.

He often had them. Great souls are peculiarly liable to these unhealthy humours. The sublime courage which carries all before it becomes weak and faint-hearted as a timid child. They pass from the mountain tops of faith to the abyss of unbelief; the barometer falls suddenly from boiling point to zero, and the man who was well-nigh superhuman becomes less than human. Elijah was down in one of the darkest chambers of Doubting Castle. Everything had turned against him. The world was full of falsehood and cruelty. The devil reigned supreme, and goodness had perished from the earth. He himself was a hunted outlaw, with a price set upon his head, every door in Israel closed against him, and every man's hand the hand of an enemy. God had forgotten him, and heaven had proved as fickle and treacherous as earth. That was how he felt, as some of you have felt in the black hours of life when you have flung prayer away in defiant scorn and declared that there was no help in God or man. And then there came to him the tender answer of a sleepless Providence—the still small voice of the love that never forgets. Help came to him in strange and unexpected ways. Wild birds brought him food when he was on the verge of starvation. He stumbled on a brook amid the arid sands when he was ready to die of thirst, and when the brook dried up and the birds failed and Nature had turned against him as well as men, and he was once more sinking into sullen despair, there came this message telling him that a home was open for him in the land of the stranger. It was the last thing in the world that he would have dreamed of. A home among the Sidonians! He hated them. Jezebel, his arch enemy, was one of that race. It was their idolatries

that had defiled and destroyed Israel. It was against them that he had waged lifelong war. And God provided a refuge for him there when every one of his own people denied him shelter, and there he found a gentle, kindly heart waiting to welcome and minister to him. A heathen woman, too; a woman whose soul was in darkness. That was the sweet mystery of it. He had become a misanthrope. He had lost all trust in men; they were all corrupt and hardened; there were none that did good or cared for good. And God sent him to this school that he might recover his faith in things divine and things human too; that he might learn to have a larger hope and a kindlier trust in poor humanity. Here was a benighted idolater, as far from God and truth and light as she could be, and yet with a heart that God had surely touched, with something of the coming Christ in her, full of pity, willing to take in a stranger, a hungry outlaw, willing to share with him her last meal. God had visited this woman though she knew it not, and opened her heart to divine emotions, and He had sent the man thither to find his faith again, and to learn a lesson in human charity. Truly God's ways are not as our ways, and His thoughts not as our thoughts. You harden your heart against men, you say they are all corrupt and deceivers, and behold He sweetly rebukes you by discovering for you in some altogether unlikely place a soul perfectly lovely, a jewel of God shining in the very darkness. You complain that God has forgotten you, that there is no justice in His dealings, and lo! He surprises you by sending help and deliverance from the most unexpected quarters. You lose all belief in prayer. You say it is against the laws of Nature, as if you knew everything about the laws of Nature; or you

say, "God cannot help me, because it passes human wit to devise a way out of my difficulties," as if God's wisdom were no larger than human wit. He can answer prayer in a thousand ways which you would never guess.

"Say not, my soul, from whence can God relieve my care?
Remember that omnipotence has servants everywhere."

Whenever you sit down in the dumps and steel your heart against God, and declare that you have no trust left in heaven or your fellow-men, read this old story of Elijah again, and let it say to you, "O, thou of little faith ! wherefore didst thou doubt ?"

II

GOD'S REWARD OF FEARLESS AND LOVING TRUST

Now take the woman's side of the story. I do not wonder that Jesus made tender mention of it. It was quite after His own heart. It was the sort of thing which He loved far more than Elijah's furious iconoclasm. It was one of the finest instances of unselfish faith in the Bible. It was a time of famine, and grim death was hovering about that cottage door. She was going out to gather sticks wherewith to cook her last meal. One meagre handful of flour and a little oil. That was all, all that the hard times had left for herself and child. And when that was gone, then that grim shape at the door would come in. That was a picture of tragedy if you like ! And just then there came up a gaunt, hungry, weary man, with the pinchings of famine written on every feature. She did not know that he was a prophet, a messenger sent by God ; she only saw a fellow-sufferer, whose

need was more urgent than her own. She heard God's voice within telling her to do just the one right and noble thing, and she did it. She took him in and shared with him all that she had. And never was a banquet on which God looked down with kindlier eye than on that spare meal. For what are the feasts which we give of our plenty, the gifts which we bestow upon the poor out of our lavish abundance compared with the gift of this woman, which was like pouring out her very heart's blood, though she belonged to no Church? That was a piece of sublime faith though she knew no creed but the idolater's. For certain am I that the noblest faith of all, whether it be orthodox or the other thing, is the faith which does the right and Christlike thing, whatever it may cost, trusting God with all that may follow. Her heart said, "God asks for it and it shall be done, and God will provide." And you cannot take a step beyond that in Christian trust. It is heroic faith to do the godly thing to-day, regardless of consequences, and believe that almighty love will take care of your to-morrow.

And the faith had its due reward. For God never fails to do His part when the brave heart has challenged Him by its simple, fearless trust. She gave her all when God appealed to her through the pleading, suffering face of a fellow-man. Perhaps she did not know that she was giving it to God. What of that? He knew. He does not judge us by our knowledge, but by the beatings and compassions of the heart. He took it as a gift to Himself, for truly every unselfish deed done to man in pure love and kindness goes straight into God's hands, and is held and prized as something given to Him. He to whom all such things are dear took the true measure

of this woman's action, and had care that she should not lose the reward. That handful of meal lasted long. It lasted longer than the famine. The last drops in the cruse of oil were never reached. The widow and her child never knew want. There was always just enough for them and for the prophet too. And that grim figure at the door still hovered about, but he never came in. God was standing at that door also, keeping watch over His own. "O, woman, great is thy faith! be it unto thee even as thou wilt." A miracle, you say, running on the same handful of meal every day and never coming to the end of it. Well, so be it, a miracle! But the kingdom of God is full of such miracles. There are things which you can never exhaust, however often and however much you draw from them. The supplying streams are always running in faster than the outflowing streams are running out. God's love and God's forgiveness are boundless oceans of that kind. The more you receive of them the more there is left to receive. The love divine never grows less, and, of course, it cannot grow larger than it is, but the more you open your hearts to the fulness of it, the grander and the sweeter does it seem to you. It is like the vision of the waters in Ezekiel. At first they are only ankle deep, but you pass on and they are up to the knees, and further on still they are waters to swim in, a river that cannot be passed over.

It is so with all that God puts into our hearts. Every divine thing in us multiplies itself by distribution, as did the loaves in the Saviour's miracle. You can never wear out faith by using it. It always grows bigger. You never exhaust your love by giving it out freely to God and the Lord Jesus and your fellow-men. You scatter it and it comes back to you

a hundred fold. The more you burn it, the more oil there is in that God-filled lamp. The more you love, the more you want to love, and the more power of loving there is in you. Let your forgiveness and sympathy and charity out freely. No need to economise them. Your souls will never be dried up by that outflow. The way to fill your hearts with Christlike things is to let them flow out abundantly every day. And even in giving material things it is sometimes well to remember that we are hardly ever made poorer by what we give. Men are impoverished by their self-indulgence, by their blunders and follies, by their rash speculations, and sometimes by the misfortunes or unrighteousness of others. But we do not often hear of a man who is brought to bankruptcy and beggary by his Christian generosity. No; these gifts are rarely felt in that way. The Lord somehow makes them up. "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth, and there is that withholdeth more than is meet and it tendeth to poverty." And be sure that whatever we give to the Lord, whether of money, time, energy, love, worship, or soul, He more than gives back again, not always in its own kind, but in fifty better ways. And faith never misses its reward. And so I take this old story, so human and so touching, and find in it just God's word to you and me, fresh as the hoar frost or the newly-fallen snow on a winter's morning.

XIX

NAAMAN

THE "BUTS" OF LIFE

2 Kings v. 1 : "A great man with his master, and honourable : but he was a leper."

THERE you have a romance and a tragedy summed up in a single verse. You only need a little imagination to fill in the details, and lo ! you have a book of human life, with its prides and humblings, its grandeurs, and its shames. The writer tells you in the same breath of this man's glory and of his awful cross. He was a mighty man of valour, the greatest captain in the land, famous for the victories he had won, the idol of the people, the favourite of the king, loaded with wealth and titles, honoured or envied by all, and with every thing save one to make him the proudest and happiest of men. And then comes the set-off, the background, the other side—"But he was a leper." That disease had laid hold of him which Eastern people dreaded most. There was not much of it yet, not enough to unfit him for his duties and keep him a prisoner. But he knew that, once started, no skill could stop it. It would spread and sink deeper until it made life one long burden and horror, and death would be prayed for as a welcome release. There was the great man, with all his possessions and honours, and with this black shadow on his life, and he would have given all that

he had and a thousand times more to have his flesh clean and healthy like a child's again.

So much to envy, so much to lift one up. But! Ah, if we could only get rid of that little word, how happy we should be! Alas! it is always popping in to disturb our self-congratulating reflections. It drops into human speech at every turn. It is found at every stage of human experience. I seem to have been hearing it all my lifetime. I hear it every day in the common talk of the people about me. I catch my own lips dropping it unawares times without number. There is always something to qualify our congratulations, praises, and thanksgivings. Fortune has dealt well with you, but! You have had a smooth and prosperous career, but! Your husband is almost perfection, but! Your children are doing well, but! That friend of yours has many admirable qualities, but! Your employer is generous and considerate, but! Your partner is honest and capable, but! Your church is orthodox, and peaceable, and pre-eminently respectable, but! Your minister is a wonderful preacher, but! And all things would be just as they ought to be, but! There is always that little or big cloud athwart your sunlight, always the wasp in the honey cup, always the seamy side to your bliss, always the dull leaden background to the shield whose face is all gold. Mercy and judgment meet, and the darkness and the light make up one picture in every human lot. Naaman was a great man, and honourable, but he was a leper. Now sometimes we forget this other side in our thoughts of others, and frequently we make too much of it in thoughts of ourselves. And if the other side relates to character, we reverse the process, making too much of it in others and overlooking it in ourselves.

I

Remember that every Naaman has his cross. The side of the shield which he shows to the world is perhaps polished gold, but he who walks behind it sees the heavy iron casing. How foolish we are to envy the great their greatness, the rich their riches, the honourable their honours, and the wise their wisdom, and to fancy that because they have more of these things than we they are necessarily happier and more contented. And how blind we are to overlook our own blessings and joys, and repine because others seem more fortunate than we. Uneasy is the head that wears any sort of crown. Where Fortune drops its choicest honours, it imposes its heaviest burdens, and the path which is lined with roses has most of the prickly thorns of care. There is no position, however favoured, which has not its dark set-off, its background of heavy burdens, its secret tale of tears. No life, however prosperous and magnificent, could write its own story truthfully without bringing in often the inevitable "but," which tells of sadder things. The more brilliant the sunlight, the darker the shadows. The more a man gets his own way, the more he frets when he cannot get his own way. You cannot climb high to pluck the choicest fruit and flowers without getting many a prick and bruise. The man who wears purple and fine linen before the world has often underneath, if you could see it, rough sack-cloth and chafing cords; and there is a cloud of cares weighing like midnight on many a heart in which outward fortune seems constantly to smile. In the old ballad the queen rides by on her gallant palfrey, with cloth of gold and glittering jewels, and splendid

array of attendants, and the village maiden, looking out of her lattice window, sighs, "Oh ! to be a queen !" while the queen, looking up, sighs far more deeply, and whispers to her heart, "Oh ! to be free from all this burden, and like that happy careless maiden !" Yes ; there are cold blasts on the heights which those below never feel ; and thorns and crosses near the seats of the mighty which humbler folk know not of ; and stings and needles on the couch of the wealthy that the lowlier man escapes ; and ghosts and skeletons in the mansion which never enter the cottage ; and temptations waiting on the favourites of Fortune which God averts from you. And many a time, when all the things of the world go well with a man, his inner life is anything but right with God. The leprosy of doubt, or the leprosy of sin has crept over all his thoughts, and corrupted his human affections, and put a withering blight upon his world, and he knows nothing of the peace and gladness in which your simple faith walks continually. No ; my brother, thou at least whose cup is fairly full of mercies, do not waste thyself in groanings over the inequalities of life. Fret not because of him who prospereth in his way. If thou couldst go round thou wouldest see that there is the other side. Naaman was a great man and honourable, but he was a leper.

II

Further, you are not likely to forget your own cross. No ; but do not make too much of it. No doubt there is a seamy side to your life. It is not all sunlight. But it is not well to keep the seamy

side always uppermost and talk as if tears and cares and worries were your meat and drink continually. Why cannot we let our cheerful thoughts have free course sometimes without stopping them with that everlasting "but"? "Yes; I have many things to be grateful for, but!" That word often expresses the concentrated essence of ingratitude. It is a volume of murmurings and fretfulness bound up in three letters. You want your bread to be buttered on both sides, and round the edges, too. My brother, it would not be good for you any more than it would for a child. Be thankful if the butter is well laid on one side. A great many have to eat it dry, and some find it hard to get it even in that form. If you have five hundred a year, why should you disquiet yourselves about that other five hundred which you have not? It would not increase your comforts one per cent., and if you got it it would increase your fever to make it another thousand. Most of us have a great deal more than we deserve already, though we should not love anybody who told us so. But if we were sometimes to say it to ourselves it might infuse a richer tone into our thanksgivings. Do not make too much, I repeat, of that other side. Your house is not so large as you desire. No; but maybe there is far more love and happiness in it than in many a bigger house. Your children are not all shaping as you would wish. No; but some of them, let us hope, bring brightness to your homes and put music into your hearts continually. Your business prospects are not brilliant maybe. No; but you have never lacked a sufficiency of comforts, and your way has always so far been made clear. There is a little shadow upon your homes: nay, perhaps a big shadow, a sort of ghost that haunts you, and weighs like a

nightmare upon you when you are going to sleep. Yes; but in every chamber there is something bright also; hearts about you with a wealth of love in them, and tokens at every step which should remind you of manifold mercies crowding in through all the past. Your friends are not perfect; no, they cross you many a time by thoughts and qualities, tempers and defects which you would gladly have otherwise. Yes; but probably, take them all in all, they are quite up to your level, and have dealt as kindly with you as you merited. We should be far happier and far more generous-hearted men if we did not make so much of that "but" in thinking of and discussing those who love us and whom we love. They please us in many things, but! Ah, well, magnify the many things, and let that other side go by. And do not forget that you have the other side also, which they find it hard to bear, but are often wondrously kind and patient. Think of all the kindly thoughts and sweet devotion and honest service which are daily laid at your feet, and then you will feel too grateful and happy to bring in that fretful and disturbing "but." What if you have crosses to bear? So have all men, great and small. And they are always small men, in another sense, and blind, yes, and selfish too, who are constantly thinking of their own crosses and forgetting those of others. "Grief," some poet says, "grief dulls the heart to everything but itself." Nay; that is only true of peevish, thankless, selfish grief. And it ought to be a heavy grief, such as comes only in the tragic hours of life, to dull your vision in such a way that you cannot see the abounding joys of life. You have your crosses, but you have beautiful compensations. You have your spells of heartache, and touches even of heartbreak, but how much more of

hours when the world is full of love and sunshine? You have to work hard, but work is happier by far than lazy self-indulgence. You feel it a terrible strain to get those sons and daughters of yours settled, but what a blank life would be if fate were to dispose of those sons and daughters and leave you childless! You have no public honours; no, but you have joys which the public man has never time to taste. You cannot set up your carriage; no, but thank God, you have got healthy limbs, and can walk as briskly and gladly as you ever did. And what are all the grandeurs of this world and its magnificent gains, compared with that quiet trust in God and its serenity, and that happy upward look and forward look which fill the Christian heart with sunshine through all its sorrows? Do you believe that God loves you, and that your path in life is a care to Him? Do you believe that Christ has set His heart upon you, and that you have a portion in His great and precious promises? Have you a deep, true faith and a prayerful heart that is seeking to do His will? Is this world to you God's world, and the Father's presence everywhere? "Yes," you say, "that is all true, but!" Well, never mind the "but"; it is not worth thinking about if all the rest is true. There is only one cross that would make life well-nigh unbearable to me, the cross which a great many people carry and they do not know—to be practically without God and without hope in the world, to find no sweetness in the name of Jesus, and to have no part in the faith which lives by Him. That would be terrible indeed. I think of some who have nearly everything in their lives which this world desires. They have fortune, and goods, and much dear human love. They have even generous qualities, frank, honest,

amiable. But the world in which they move has no Christ in it, and their hearts are never melted by the old, old story, for they do not quite believe it. And that which is most to me is nothing to them. However happy they seem, I think of them sorrowfully. It is such a big, pathetic, tragical "but" that you have to set against all their joys. They make one feel as the Hebrew maiden in Naaman's house must have felt about her master. He was such a great man, and so honourable; but he was a leper !

XX

NAAMAN AND ELISHA

THE NEEDS WHICH LEVEL ALL

2 Kings v. 9-12 : "So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean. But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned, and went away in a rage."

THERE is no need to repeat the details of this story. All its personages and incidents are known to every one who has but a child's acquaintance with the Bible. Naaman and Elisha and the little Hebrew maid who introduced them to each other. No one who has ever seen these figures pass across the Bible stage can ever forget them. There are few dramatic contrasts more striking than those which are grouped together here. A man lifted up to the highest pinnacle of fame, laden with honour and wealth, able to command the services of a nation, yet with a disease creeping over him which no skill could cure, and a dreadful death slowly, steadily marching towards him. The magnificence of human life alongside its pitiable feebleness. There are always tragedies enough of that kind to humble our loftiest pride to the dust. And then to think that when all the renowned and clever healers had been appealed to in vain, God

appointed a despised slave girl to bring the man a message of hope and salvation, to tell him that there was a mighty healer in the land of Israel who could perchance give him sweetness and newness of life again. God's deliverance always comes through unexpected instruments. Science utterly fails, and then a child's pitying heart prevails. And the man had grace enough to believe the child's message, or at least to make proof of it as his last forlorn hope. We read of the journey which he took, carried through with the sumptuous accompaniments which befitted so great a man, with a king's letter of introduction, with an imposing retinue of servants, and a long procession of beasts of burden carrying treasure wherewith to reward his healer. For he thought the prophet would be more compliant if treated with a show of magnificence and tempted with an enormous fee. He had found in the ordinary experience of life that most people could be bought if the price was fixed high enough, and he was quite of the opinion that this so-called man of God would be open to the same inducements. He was speedily to discover that there are exceptions even to that rule.

So the grand procession moved on until it reached Elisha's unpretentious house. And there at the door he stopped, sitting still in his fine chariot and sending a servant to announce his arrival. He was far too important to descend and wait upon the doctor. The doctor, no doubt, would hurry out with bows and smiles and politest deferences, and express the honour done him by the visit of so distinguished a patient, and then he would prescribe for the disease and gratefully take the pay. But Elisha was neither a courtier nor a hireling. He was a man who walked in the presence of God, who felt God's hand upon him, and

knew that he was anointed servant and representative of the King of kings. In the dignity of his heavenly calling he was lifted above the great ones of the earth, and had little respect for all their splendour and pride. Instead of going out with obsequious flattery upon his lips, he sent a brief message to the high and mighty captain. "Go, wash seven times in Jordan." Then did the wrath of humbled haughtiness explode. "To think that he should dare to treat me in this fashion, as if I were a mendicant at his door! I, who am so renowned; I, who come with royal letters in my hands and ten thousand pounds ready for the fee." It was beyond endurance. "I thought indeed he would come out and stand, or more probably kneel, and put his hand on the place and call on the name of his God. I thought indeed he would be mightily impressed by my wealth and dignity, and lo! he sends me a message fit for a pauper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" So he turned and went away in a rage. And now let us read the lessons of the story as they are intended for all of us. For Elisha there spoke, as God speaks, and reads out to us some of the deeper thoughts of our religion.

I

That in God's sight we are all equal, and in our greatest needs and agonies have to take our place at His mercy seat alongside the lowliest and the poorest. There are many who, like this Syrian nobleman, cannot understand that wealth, position, and titles are not reckoned in heaven's court, and give them no advantage before God. It is difficult for them to

believe that He despises the show and parade which command the worship of the world. The man with a great name and a great fortune is so accustomed to be treated as if he were made of different clay from the common crowd that he thinks it almost beneath him to kneel in prayer in their company. Surely the Almighty does not class them all together! Surely there is some recognition of great and low! What are all our successes and gifts if they do not win for us a trifle more consideration from heaven than if we had failed? Surely the man who can lavish his thousands on works of charity will be writ larger in God's book than the widow with her poor two mites! The Church makes a hundred times more of him, and does not the Church speak the voice of God? Poor Naaman! Cannot you forgive him! He had been drilled into this sort of belief all his life until he came to Elisha. And so men are drilled into it now until it becomes almost impossible to believe otherwise. The man who has the best seat in the sanctuary, and an almost royal reception when he comes, can hardly help thinking there will be a distinguished place for him in the upper sanctuary; and the lady who sits in her velvet-cushioned pew and prays out of her golden-clasped prayer book finds it hard to believe that she will be judged by God in the same way as that very ordinary sinner who wears nothing but a threadbare coat. So mighty and ever-present are these distinctions, that we carry them with us unconsciously to the feet of God, and do not know that heaven is laughing to scorn our folly. For the crowned king and the beggar in rags have an equal place in His heart of pity if they have equally humble, contrite, and penitent hearts, and all our pretensions are no more than the dust on the butterfly's wings before His almighty

ness. The golden key may open every other door on earth, but it cannot open the door to His mercy throne, to His saving power, to His living Church, and to the ranks of His redeemed. And we have all to take the lowest place before He stoops to bless us. And we know too well that when the great needs come we are, in spite of ourselves, brought down to an awful equality. Pride vanishes when the agonies of a lingering sickness are upon us, when death hangs threatening over the life we love best, when the last enemy is knocking at our own door. In the terrible bereavements of life, and when the things we have trusted in fail us, wealth and the world's worship are as powerless to help us as the sighing winds or the dust under our feet. The more the gold, the greater the mockery of it. We have just to take our place with the poorest of the poor, crying out our broken cries to the living, pitying God. We are equal then; Naaman and the humblest servant in his train. And we are always equal, if we only knew it, in the sight of the great King.

II

The pride of morality, like the pride of wealth, is levelled down when it comes to God. There are people like Naaman who draw back with a little haughtiness when they are told to wash in the water prepared for all sorts and conditions. Only one way of cleansing for all, the disreputable and the respectable, the lives that have been muddied and fouled in the sloughs and cesspools of sin, and the lives which have been only spotted with the milder failings and tempers of well-regulated society. That seems extravagant, unreasonable, and ridiculous. They

have lived a fairly straight, upright, virtuous life. Their character has no gross stain upon it. They have done no egregious wrong. They have never fallen in slippery places. They are not adulterers, extortioners, unjust, or even as this publican. It is an insult to their dignity to class them with the common ruck of sinners. "Do not talk to us about the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness. That may do for people who have been steeped up to their necks in depraved ways and doings. Do we need washing and renewing? Are we to go to the cross of Jesus with the burden of shame and the tears of penitence and the cry for atonement, just as if we were like some abandoned drunkard or thief out of prison? Are we to voyage to the land beyond in the same boat with the very refuse of the earth?" So many a heart secretly talks with itself, though perhaps the lips would not blurt it out. And God is always saying to us, "Yes, thou proud Naaman, thou art in need of the same washing as the guiltiest. There is the leprosy of sin in thee though those haughty eyes of thine see not the spots. There is the sin of pride in thee, and the sin of self-conceit, and the sin of despising others. Thou art selfish and unloving. Thou art covetous and envious, and in many a thing thou art false. Considering all thy moral and religious advantages, thou hast erred and strayed from My ways as much as the ignorant and degraded. If thou knewst thyself as I know thee, thou wouldst just kneel down and say, 'Vile and full of sin I am, black I to the fountain fly.' Thou wouldst cling to the cross as desperately as any lost, self-despising creature. Thou needest that cleansing as much as any." God makes no difference. He brings us all to Calvary that He may humble all, and

then exalt. He knows that we have all the same needs; that the demands which we make on His forgiveness are infinitely great for every one. Christ died for the best as well as for the worst. We are all on the same level when we gather round His table and remember His great sacrifice. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin. Go thou and wash with all thy fellow-men in that mercy fount, for heaven is not opened to those who are saints in their own esteem, but only to those who kneel at its gates with the confession of lowliest sinners.

III

There is an intellectual pride which has to come down with Naaman in the presence of God. We hear the talk of a great many of these Naamans to-day. We see them sitting in their lofty chariot with the treasures of knowledge about them, and science, like a long retinue of servants, ministering to them, and they say, "Are not these sufficient to make us wise? Are we to wash in these humble rivers of Judea before we can have our eyes opened? Are we, who have learned all that the most advanced thinkers know, who in knowledge are the heirs of all the ages in the foremost ranks of time; are we, in face of all modern discoveries and all the great thoughts which have illumined the expanding minds of men in these times; are we to sit like children at the feet of out-of-date Hebrew prophets and drink wisdom from the lips of rude Galilean fishermen, and make that ancient book our guide which was written no one knows when or by whom? Are we to trust for light and truth to the utterances of that Jewish Carpenter

who lived and died in an illiterate land nearly two thousand years ago? Are not our mental treasures better than all the waters of Israel?" There are thousands expressing themselves in scornful questions like these. And God's answer still comes to them, "Yes; if you would be made whole you must go and wash in those Jordan waters." For truly there is still no other way to find out the secrets of life and God. That old book does not pretend to compete with modern wisdom. Those ancient prophets and psalmists and apostles were a long way behind any School Board boy in fifty points of culture, and Jesus Himself never offered to teach men the things which their schoolmasters could teach them. But if we would learn the deep things of the human heart and the deeper things of God, we must either go to them or we have nowhere else to go to. There is no science outside that book which can teach us the meaning of life or throw light on the mystery of death. There are no other windows which open out on the heaven beyond. There are no other truths save those which Jesus uttered that can quiet us in times of trouble, and comfort us in life's agonies, and make us brave when misfortune comes, and kindle the light of hope in the soul when the last dread hour approaches. There is no place on this earth where we can find real forgiveness, peace, perfect joy, and a father's pitiful face except the place where they crucified Him.

For these things we must go like any little child to Him who is the light of lights, the victor over death, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And to the waters which flowed from Him we at least are always glad to go and wash and find glad life and healing.

XXI

ELISHA

THE ENCOMPASSING DEFENCE OF THE FAITHFUL

2 Kings vi. 17 : "And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man ; and he saw : and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."

THE whole story is a panorama of pictures worthy of the greatest painter's skill. Yet no artist could put the pictures on canvas with more striking effect than the simple word-painting of the writer gives them. His purpose is to impress upon us the triumphant might of single-handed faith against all the unrighteous forces that can be brought against it. And he shows us armies of flesh and blood worked like marionettes on a stage by a performer out of sight, and dancing to the tune which God has set when they think they are following music of their own. The writer brightens the whole narrative with touches of genuine humour. He satirises brute force; he pricks the vanity of self-consequential personages; he makes us laugh at the unequal combat which ends ignominiously for the stronger side. A blustering, arrogant king, with all his counsellors and soldiers, is tricked, outwitted, and discomfited by one solitary unarmed opponent. His captains, chariots, and horsemen are but playthings in the prophet's hands. He uses them as we use clay, and grimly smiles at the shapes they take. It is the battle of intelligence against bulk, of spiritual insight against

material masses, of truth and faith against the powers of darkness and ignorance. It is one page in the world-long story. A sample picture of the battle which is always going on, and in which victory always inclines to those moral and spiritual forces which gained it here.

But the incident in the story which is best worth dwelling on is that which I have read you in the text. Two men here stand together in the same danger—the prophet and the young man who was both his pupil and servant. The young man was shivering like a leaf shaken in the wind. He saw that huge army which had come to capture them. He heard the clangour of their weapons and the tramp of their horses. Ten thousand enemies, ten thousand terribly substantial facts which he could measure and appreciate, and against them two unarmed, helpless, defenceless creatures caught in a trap—that was all he saw. “Alas! my master, what shall we do?” The prophet stood with face set like a rock, illumined with a proud confidence, and as restful as a child held fast in a strong mother’s arms. He looked with calm disdain upon the huge battalion which girt them round, and pitied the needless alarm of his white-faced, fearsome follower, for he saw that over the city and over the mountains beyond there were other armies, not of flesh and blood, armies sent forth by a greater King, those forces of God which mortal eyes never see until the prayer of faith has opened them. There they stood awaiting God’s signal, ready to descend when the set moment came to fight this man’s battle and put to flight his foes. There was no room for fear in the heart which had a vision of those things. Now, I do not pretend to say that there were real chariots and horses of fire upon that

mountain, and that the prophet truly saw them. It may have been so, but it is much more likely that the whole account is a figurative representation of a spiritual vision and spiritual forces. I leave that for Bible critics to deal with, and fasten my thoughts upon the underlying truth, which is this—

I

That the greatest forces in this world are the forces which we call spiritual and invisible, and the strong, brave, fearless men are the men who believe in these forces, lean upon them, and in a certain sense see and grasp them. It is not so with the man of facts and figures, with what the Bible calls the darkened mind of the children of this world. He sets at nought all that he cannot see and measure. He stupidly thinks that the five senses take in everything. He takes stock of his material resources, counts men, weapons, machinery, and money, throws in perhaps a little brain, scientific knowledge, intellectual smartness, and then concludes that he has all the equipment which he needs for life's battle, or at least all the equipment which it is possible to gain. Turn to the Bible and you at once get into the company of men whose might is in other weapons, who are covered with the invisible panoply of God, and who see around them the spiritual chariots and horses. They take little account of material masses and numbers. They laugh at huge figures. A grain of faith outweighs the resources of a kingdom. And there is no question about their heroic strength and fearlessness. The sceptic would call it imagination, but it is the kind of imagination which invests them with wonderful power. If it is a craze it is the sort

of craze which makes us wish we were all crazy. For these men are the world's masters; they have all a touch of the superhuman. We see them stand alone and unsupported, threatened and opposed, stormed at by the shot and shell of human fury, yet undismayed, as if all the legions of heaven were waiting their bidding. Moses defying the might of Egypt; Gideon with his little regiment charging the vast army of Midianites; Elijah in lonely grandeur challenging the furious rabble of Baal's prophets; Daniel setting at nought the king's princes, nobles, and hungry lions of Babylon; Peter and John scornfully resisting the browbeating magistrates; Stephen and Paul facing with majestic serenity the mobs that stoned them; and, above all, the great Cross-bearer, treading His winepress alone and claiming the world as His own though it was all against Him. Magnificent figures were all these. We would give all our goods to be like them. Yet it was simply their belief in the unseen forces which made them what they were. They saw the fiery chariots and the armies of heaven. They knew that God and Omnipotence were on their side, and only the fickle whims and passions of men against them. They knew that only temporal things resisted them, and that eternal things, eternal truth, justice, and light were their allies, working together to ensure the final triumph. Christ saw what the blind eyes around Him could not see. To others there was only the cross, the nails, the jeers, the shame, the cries of the drivelling multitude. To Him there was a whole world beyond. There was a moral power knitting the hearts of men and nations together. There was a great fire of love divine, in which human hatred and the devil's works would be consumed. There was an attractive force in that

cross which would slowly draw all men. Jesus saw all that as clearly as we see each other. And therefore there was no fear there, but the strength and patience and mastery which comes to all men when the unseen forces are behind them. "Behold, the mountain was full of chariots and horses of fire round about."

II

It is always these unseen forces that we reckon upon in our Christian warfare to-day. What we call faith is just Elisha's vision and the steadfast heart which it brings. Faith, if not actually compassed about by invisible armies, is nerved, inspired, and energised by thoughts, upliftings, and confidences which make a man more than a match for his fellow-men. Without that, the battle for God's truth and religion would be a forlorn and wretchedly hopeless business. The valiant fighters in it are always outnumbered and overmatched. Religious censuses would fill us with despair if we weighed spiritual forces in ordinary scales. Where there is one man mightily earnest in this struggle there are ten standing aloof, and ten more lukewarm. And the mass of opposing and obstructing things is hugely vast and terrible. Animalism, selfishness, greed, impurity, and besotted ignorance; what an awful array of devilry and sin there is to face! The fight seems most unequal. The odds are all apparently on the evil side. Yet we never lose heart until we have lost all faith. We are always optimists until our eyes become blind to the unseen forces. These unseen forces are operating on every man. We have allies in every man's heart. When he is most against us, there is

something in him that is for us. People talk about religion declining, and even going out altogether. The thing is impossible. A man cannot get rid of the unseen. If he puts it out at the door it comes in again at the window. It follows him like a shadow or ghost when he thinks he has buried it. Every man has occasional visions of the fiery chariots. There is a judgment throne which he can never wholly forget. There is an eternal righteousness which he knows he must reckon with. And every man believes, or at least fears, that there is a higher justice which will at last outwit the craft of the wicked and avenge the wrongs of the innocent, and give to every man according to his works. There is something in every man which secretly sides with the good. There is conscience, and memory, and unrest, and a lurking fear of the very God whom he denies. And in good men there is the strengthening assurance, the invigorating, recreating assurance that God is with him, that all the everlasting things are for him, that the promises are his, that the future belongs to him, and that he carries into the battle the strength of ten men. The warfare is not unequal, as it seems. You have to add all these unseen forces to your count of heads and numbers, and then you never doubt that you are on the winning side. "Behold, the mountains are full of chariots and horses of fire round about."

III

Remember that these and countless unseen forces are over and around every one who is resolutely bent on living the Christian life. We often hear of the difficulties of the Christian life. I think we hear

more about its difficulties than about its helps. We get into the murmuring vein of the children of Israel, who were always magnifying shadows into mountains and ordinary foes into terrible giants. We speak of the sore temptations, and the desperate conflicts, and the trials of patience, and the pricking thorns, and burdensome crosses. We think of our poor bodies and the spiritual ailments which they bring, and of the fleshly lusts we have to wrestle with, and the unruly tempers we have to subdue. We talk about the world's seductions, the enticements of its pleasure scenes, the power of its fashions over the weak human will, and the chains which the love of gold forges around us. We say, "How is it possible to escape the corrupting atmosphere, to resist the demoralising influences, and to walk unspotted through all the muddy ways of business? How can we keep up the high ideals amid all the lowering environment?" Such questions come at times to the best of us, and we find ourselves crying out with poor Jacob, "All these things are against me!" There are many, indeed, who will tell you that the Christian life cannot be lived, and that those who are professing to live it are either engaged in a desperate undertaking or making a pretentious show. Yet surely there is another and brighter and diviner side to all that which the darkened eyes do not see, and which the despondent mind often forgets. There are many things against the godly life, but there are more things for it. Yes, we have more helps than temptations, more inspirations than discouragements, more incentives and wings than drawbacks and chains. Does not every child's face preach a gospel of purity to us? Most of the books we read, if they are worth reading, tell us something of goodness and righteousness and

the rewards which follow faithful service. Everywhere about us we see the terrible fruits of sin warning, and everywhere noble lives pointing us to the better way. Everywhere there are gleams of beauty and visions of lovely things in the midst of guilt and God-forgetting. There are all the noble teachings of youth and childhood which can never be erased. There are relationships and home ties and the obligations of affection pleading with us to live upright lives. There are even in all the sorrows, disappointments, and sadder scenes of life forms like those of angels which point the finger upward. There are always chance and change about to bring us to the feet of the changeless God, and there are the sad funeral processions always passing by and reading to us lessons of the life beyond. To most of us there is what we call the witness of the Spirit, the voice of God speaking to us in a thousand tones of promise and warning. There is the remembrance of our sainted dead urging us to strive after higher things. To some of us there is the sweet consciousness of the living, ever-present Christ, and the mighty inspiration of His love, and to all of us the thought of what lies beyond, and where the shadows disappear. It is hard to be a Christian, you say ! Yes ; but it would be a great deal harder to put aside all these things and live as though they were not. The armies and forces of flesh and sin are strong enough, but stronger by far to some of us are the other forces. Surely the mountains are full of horses and chariots of fire around us.

XXII

DAVID

THE SAVING POWER OF A TEMPTED LIFE

Psalm xvii. 1, 5, 6: "O Lord, attend unto my cry ; give ear unto my prayer, that goeth not out of feigned lips. Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not. I have called upon thee ; for thou wilt hear me, O God."

THE heading calls this a prayer of David, or, literally a prayer set to music, and that is all we know about the Psalm. It is one of David's devotional cries. There are at least some fifty other similar prayers attributed to him. It used to be thought by simple Bible readers that all the Psalms were composed by David. Now the advanced critic does his utmost to prove that David did not write any of them. That view gives a shock to all our lifelong thoughts of Israel's sweet singer, and is besides utterly untenable. We believe still that we owe to this man David most of our dearest Psalms, and especially the supplicatory Psalms. For the greater part of the songs which bear his name have something of the quality and nature of prayer. They mingle praises with entreaties, but they nearly always contain cries for forgiveness, upholding, deliverance, and help. They are like this present Psalm, the utterances of a man who falls back on God daily in his extremity, who cries out of the depths of human need to the pitiful ear and sympathetic heart of the Almighty. The prayers of David are a precious heritage to the whole

Church and to all of us. In one of the Psalms he calls his prayers tears which God gathers up and keeps in a bottle. It is rather a curious figure, and yet it has been proved true in a way that David little imagined. God has kept them for the refreshment of saints through all generations.

I

And here we are first reminded of the things which live longest. There is nothing left of David but his prayers. By them he, being dead, yet speaketh to us. They have kept his name alive through the wear and change and decay of long millenniums. The perfume of them still spreads its sacred odour through every Jewish synagogue and Christian sanctuary. All else that he did and was is gone, lost, buried, and well-nigh forgotten. Little do we think of or care for the battles which he fought, the kingdom which he built up, the royal city which he founded, or the temple which he projected. Not a stone monument or symbol remains of them all, save that a modern city of Jerusalem stands on the site which he selected. Otherwise, time has spared nothing but these prayers. And really it is a case of what science calls the survival of the fittest. They were the best things in his life, though he did not know it. He had no great opinion of their value. He called them cries, breathings, sometimes groans. He never supposed that they would be remembered centuries after he was gone. He thought that the kingdom, throne, and dynasty which he had erected would probably last as long as the moon endured, but these prayers would have their little day and

cease to be. Yet these are the things which remain from all the waste and wreckage; these soul voices rise above the waters like imperishable rock, washed by the waves of three thousand years and not worn away. God has preserved them because they were the breath of His own inspiration and the work of His own hands.

I can well believe that we all make similar miscalculations. We never know what the big events of our lives are, and which of our doings and words are of permanent value. Things which seem great to us are small enough in God's eyes, and that which we half despise is written down in His book as worth perpetuating. In thirty or fifty years there will be little or nothing left of the things whereof we boast —the clever strokes of business, the fortunate speculations, the wealth and honours gained by prodigious labour. Time will soon bury them under heaps of dust. But the prayers which you teach your children will be found after fifty years in them and their children. Your own cries and pantings and strivings after God will bring forth fruits in you, and perhaps in others to the end of life, and through eternity. There is something deathless in a prayer that goes out of unfeigned lips. It puts a bit of God and divine power into one's life, and it abides when all the goods and transitory treasures of the world have passed back to the dust from which they came. "A prayer of David," says the heading of the Psalm; and I read in that God's stamp of immortality placed on the thing which he counts of most worth.

II

We are reminded, secondly, that it is as the praying man chiefly that God's great ones are known. David has taken his place in history, in the Bible, and in our affections by that. We see his portrait drawn in the words, "I have called upon Thee, for Thou wilt hear me, O God." That was his habitual attitude. We understand him best through the Psalms, and the Psalms always show him looking up and holding hard on to God. He is a poor, weak, sin-stained mortal, but behold, he prays. That is the strong feature and the secret of all his strength. We know him pre-eminently in that aspect. He was a great many other things; manifold and many-sided. Few men have possessed more varied abilities or distinguished themselves in so many different ways. He was a great sovereign, a great statesman, a great soldier, a great poet and singer. He was distinctly one of the world's dozen master minds, richly endowed with extraordinary gifts and genius. Yet it is as the praying man that we chiefly remember him; the man of penitence and confession, who wets his couch with tears, who wrestles in his lonely chamber, whose soul goes hard after God. We see him with the anxious, uplifted face, with the hands clasped together in entreaty, bringing his load of sin to the all-merciful feet, pleading passionately for forgiveness, cleansing, purity, spiritual strengthening, and the light of God's favouring face. We see him praying in diverse places, in mountain cave, on hillside, in his own house and in the tabernacle, in the watches of the night, in the heat of noonday and in the dewy morning; thirsting for God, hungering for a benediction, clinging ever to the rock which overshadows and

protects him. The greater part of the man's life is written for us in his prayers, and if you took them away the man David, as we know him, would be lost to us.

Now I am afraid there are not many of us of whom that experience could be reported. There is not a great number of us who will be remembered at the close of our little day as emphatically and above all things praying men and women. We do a little at it, but never enough to become adepts in it, and never enough to win that particular reputation. This is not an age of prayer. It is too much an age of pleasure, and the two things never harmonise. And it is an age also far too full of drive, hurry, and feverish strain to afford room for much prayer. We need a little quietness and sacred leisure to commune with God, and we hardly ever get that. This is a time of manifold religious activities. The saints are all busy as bees, scurrying and hurrying to their good work like cyclists breaking the record. It is all beautiful if they would cry halt now and then to spend a moment on their knees. But they are almost afraid of being called lazy Christians if they do that. And we do not greatly believe in prayer because we practise it so little. For verily that which we neglect we come to despise. Disuse breeds scepticism. Only the man who prays much thoroughly believes in prayer, and he only knows God, and he only knows himself. He only realises his weakness, temptability, sinfulness, and dependence. He alone is fully equipped for life's battle, able to resist, and strong to bear. For true, brave men, heroic and fearless souls, are still made, as they were of old, upon their knees. You cannot really ascend unless you frequently assume that attitude. It is

God who lifts a man up, and a man cannot well be lifted up unless he sometimes lays hold of God's hand and clings. There is no substitute for prayer in the making of good, resolute, and conscientious men. Science and literature, schools and newspapers can make polished manners, keen intellects, sharpened wits, clever politicians, cute business men. But the rich and beautiful soul, strong to do the right, stern in hating the wrong, scornful of the world's seductions, fearless in sorrow, hopeful in disappointment and defeat, that soul can only be made in the simple, grand old way which David and our fathers trod—the King's highway of prayer. We know David through Psalms like this—"O Lord, attend unto my cry, give ear unto my prayer that goeth not out of feigned lips." Thirdly, we are reminded that it is—

III

The prayers of a man which make his life fit to be written and worth remembering. Fancy what David would have been without such morning cries as this—"Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not." There never was a man who wore more slippery shoes than this man. They were steeped in oil. It needed a strong hand to hold him from gliding and slithering down. Fancy what David would have been and become without his prayers! What a miserable history he would have made up, if there had been any history of him left to tell! I think his memory would just have rotted, as is the fate of the memory of wicked men. David narrowly escaped being the worst of sinners. Nay,

he was that at times, in spite of all. Sainthood had a harder struggle for life in this man than it has in you, and it was saved many a time as by fire. Out of the miry pit he came, out of the net, out of the devil's dungeons, out of very hell, to be set on the rock again. He is always a mystery to the meek and innocent people who never do any wrong. He is always a scorn to people who never do anything particularly right. They cannot understand the mixture of good and evil in him, the awful clash and conflict between the sinner and the saint. This man's soul was always a battlefield. It was full of fire, whirlwind, and passion. It was not two natures in one, but fifty natures. He had hotter blood, and fiercer lusts, and wilder ambitions, and grander emotions, and nobler aspirations than other men. Everything about him and in him was fashioned in a giant's mould. He could not do anything in an ordinary way. His very sins were big, appalling sins. His moral falls were abysmal. His repenances were like the shaking and groaning of a mountain, fierce as volcanic fire. He was just the sort of man, if God had let him take his own way, to do the world's guilty work in a thoroughly wholesale fashion. It was just the sort of life to weave itself into awful tragedy and leave behind a memory of horror and shame if it had not been for his prayers. He was saved and redeemed by his daily crying to God, "Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not." That fastened the restraining chain upon him. Prayer held the helm of the vessel, and carried it through the terrible blasts and past the cruel rocks into the harbour of salvation at last. And we each, in our own way and measure, need to be saved after the manner of David. We are not giants like him;

we are not gifted with the same wildly luxuriant nature; we have hardly the same opportunities and temptations to commit big, startling sins; we have never fallen so low, and we never rise so high as he did in his worst and best hours. But we are in the same conflict; we have to meet much the same kind of moral foes, a little modernised and polished, but substantially unchanged. And we have that same mixture of good and evil which made up the changing kaleidoscope of his romantic life. We are not saints, nor wholly sinners, but a very little of the one and a great deal of the other. Thackeray in one of his books says there are three classes of men and women. There are first those on whom in their early lives the Prince of Evil seems to have laid his dread mark. Even as children they are corrupt and wicked of tongue, and false and greedy before their time, with hideous precocity behind their faces, and they march through life a sad procession of lost ones, lost from the first. And then there is the happy class, about whom there is never any doubt, the spotless and white-robed ones to whom virtue is easy, in whose pure bosoms faith nestles and doubts find no entrance, who are good children, good sons and daughters, good fathers and mothers, and good all through. And, thirdly, there is the doubtful and uncertain class, always on their trial, who fall and rise again, who are often worsted in life's battle, beaten down, wounded, sorely smitten by the devil, but not killed, who renew the fight and escape and conquer sometimes but not always. David belonged to that third class, and so do we, most of us. Here and there perhaps is a woman who keeps her heart fairly white, but she needs prayer to help her. But the rest of us have a hard fight to keep ourselves even a little above the

weltering chaos of evil. And we sometimes drop down tired and beaten, and narrowly escape. Some people tell you that you can be religious and good and every desirable thing without Sabbath helps and sanctuary upliftings and prayer. Believe them if you please and if you are vain enough of your own strength. As for me, I would rather find safety at God's feet, crying with the old Psalmist the cry, "Give ear to the prayer that goeth not out of feigned lips. Hold up my goings in Thy paths, that my footsteps slip not."

XXIII

DAVID

PRAYER FOR LIGHT AND GUIDANCE

Psalm lxxxvi. 11 : "Teach me Thy way, O Lord. I will walk in Thy truth. Unite my heart to fear Thy name."

THE Psalm tells of danger and difficulties. It shows us a man walking in dark and uncertain ways, greatly troubled and perplexed, and hesitating as to which course he ought to take. Man cannot help him. Intellectual light fails; even conscience ceases to be a sure guide. He therefore seeks direction from God, and prays that the light from heaven may make his path clear. "Teach me Thy way, O Lord." This, we are told, is a prayer of David. It is a prayer which he frequently offered. We find it woven into one Psalm after another. David had no great confidence in his own heart. He was not wise in his own conceit; he was afraid of yielding to his own impulses. They had often played tricks with him and betrayed him into blunders and crimes. He knew how the human heart is disposed to take that which is easy and pleasant in preference to that which is hard and right. He knew how readily we mistake an ambition for an inspiration; a prejudice for a conscientious conviction; and a torch-light of vanity and self-love for a star of duty. He wished to be saved from this, and day by day he looked up to God, beseeching, "Show me Thy way; teach me Thy paths; lead me in the way everlasting."

A man in David's position needed special light, almost more than we do. He trod a somewhat solitary path in morals and religion. He had no spiritual masters at whose feet he could sit. Our world is made brilliant by guiding lights and example. We have Christ and Christian influences and Christian finger-posts everywhere about us. At every step we read a sign, "This is the way, walk ye in it." The whole Bible is before us, and countless other books which have borrowed their light from the Bible. David's world was a dark world; saints were few; the lamp of truth burnt dimly and smokily; the path was never well-defined. He was, like many of those Old Testament worthies, a sort of pioneer in the moral jungle, making a way rather than treading one already well made. The men about him had very confused notions of God, dark conceptions of religion; their views on morality and moral obligation and righteousness were crude, imperfect, and often utterly misleading. A man like David, who sincerely wished to do right, was often tossed about between opposite opinions—puzzled, distracted, and at his wits' end. It is so much easier to follow than to lead. No wonder that he sometimes failed and went egregiously wrong; the wonder is, that on the whole he walked straight and true. He would not have done that if he had not watched constantly for divine indications, if he had not spent much time upon his knees, if he had not made this his habitual cry: "Teach me Thy way, O Lord. Cause me to know the way wherein I should go."

Yet we need to offer this prayer only less, if at all less, than those men of old. It is true that we have more light upon moral problems. Our thoughts of duty are clearer and more precise, because they

have been illumined by Him who is the Light of the world. His teachings and His example are a well-marked chart on life's uncertain sea, yet we do not always know how to steer the ship; we often hold the helm with trembling hands, and the stars to which we look for guidance are hidden in thick clouds. We often find ourselves in moral perplexities, riddles are set before us for which we can find no solution. The man who is always sure that he is in the right is generally the man who is most frequently in the wrong. To be over confident is not a proof of unerring wisdom, but an indication of obstinate and purblind folly. There are always large public questions in which it is difficult to see and decide what is right, questions on which the wisest and the best of men do not see eye to eye, and on which the most religious consciences stand halting and undetermined. If you read one newspaper, and let it do all your thinking for you, and swear by its utterances, you will have no difficulty in arriving at a conclusion—you will be as certain that your views are just as if the Almighty had spoken them directly to you. And what is more, you will probably think that every man who differs from you is neither Christian nor honest. You will say that he is either biassed by self-interest or given up to a delusion to believe a lie. There is always a good deal of this ignorant but infallible assuredness about, which is as wanting in real wisdom as it is in charity. But if you endeavour to think for yourselves, and to take a broad view of disputed questions, and look at all the varied aspects of them, you will not be so determined in your own opinion. There will be times when you feel like a child crying in the dark. And even if you make up your minds that a thing is right, you will have grace and humility

enough to acknowledge that men as good as you, and quite as honest, and quite as devoted Christians, may deem that same thing wrong. And we all need more and more to submit our judgment concerning these things to the higher Power, and study them, not always with a newspaper before us, and with the cries of the streets in our ears, but to study them sometimes on our knees; to think them over in the secret place of the Almighty, and say: "Teach me Thy way, O Lord." We are often in similar, and even greater perplexities in the affairs of private life and in the determination of our Christian course of action. Men who take narrow and, therefore, rigidly decided views of what a Christian ought to do and be, who have got all their little Christian virtues cut and dried and tied up in one all-comprehending bundle, will tell you that they have never any doubt, and that the way would be plain enough for you if you would only see it. But they are not the sweetest of men, nor the most Christlike, and there are more things in heaven and earth than are comprehended in their philosophy. Most of us cannot always go straight forward without a misgiving. There is not a "Thus saith the Lord" waiting for us, pat and opportune at every turn. We are not always sure what God would have us do, or even what Christ would do if He were placed in our circumstances; and even if we have a fairly accurate guess of what He would do, it by no means follows that He would order us to do just the same. The way is dark, with mingled lights and shadows strewn; there are conflicting voices both within and without. Business has terrible moral difficulties, and not less the professional and domestic life. The training of children and the disposal of children is always a formidable problem. And in

distinctly religious things one never knows clearly how much time he should devote to them, and how much labour, how much he ought to give in money to God's work and the service of his fellow-men; how many indulgences and pleasures of the world he should resign. There are sometimes conflicting duties, one more urgent than the other, if you could only find it out; but that is not always easy. And hardly ever a day passes, indeed, but the religious conscience is in a strait betwixt two opinions, and there is a struggle. There is no man or woman among you anxious to live honourably, righteously and purely, who does not hesitate, baffled and weary many a time, and cry for some wiser solution than his own poor heart can devise. Times come to all of us which make us feel that the wisest is but a child, and that we are helpless indeed unless we can kneel where David knelt, and say, "Teach me Thy way, O Lord." It is very evident, then, that we need this prayer, and cannot offer it too frequently and too earnestly. In fact, there is little chance of continuance in straight and upright conduct unless we get into the habit, as David did, of suspecting our own way, the way that we would naturally choose and to which our inclinations would lead, the way of desire, impulse, passion, and self-love, suspecting and distrusting that, and kneeling humbly before God each day, asking Him to show us which way He would have us go. In truth there is such a strong pull in the other direction that we are not likely to take the right way in any doubtful moment unless the light is made clear, unless we feel the drawings of a mightier Power, unless we ask each day, and often more than once a day, in all humility and in all sincerity, that God will make us feel that drawing Power, and show

us that light, and cause us to know the way wherein we should go. I tremble for myself and you, for our Christian life and integrity, if we cannot say, and do not often say, from our deepest hearts—

“Thy way, not mine, O Lord,
However dark it be;
O lead me by Thine own right hand,
Choose out the path for me.”

But now, to offer this prayer two things are indispensable. We must first believe that prayer is a real thing, offered to a real Being, offered to One who hears and takes the trouble to answer, and who can answer in ways unknown to us. We must believe that we have in heaven a Father and not an immovable Force; a sympathetic heart, and not an all-wise power who keeps His wisdom to Himself, and only pities our follies and floundering. We must believe that He is willing to guide us, and, better still, that He is able to guide us, though He never speaks to us, and we never see His face. Yes, you must believe that He can send rays of His inexhaustible light into each single heart as His special gift to you. It is of no use praying at all, unless you have faith enough for that. For it is largely a matter of faith. We can rarely see or understand in what particular way He grants us His illumination and guidance. We hear no voice, we discern no signs. He does not always send us a sermon or a friend at the nick of time to point out the very thing we should do. We cannot always open the Bible and light upon the very text which has been prepared for us; that sometimes happens, but we cannot depend upon it. He seems to hide Himself. And there are some even who say that His guiding light is but a creature of our imagination, and that however much a man prays

he has still to make his own unaided choice, and that knowledge, reason, conscience, and self-interest are his only helpers. Yet what folly it is to limit God's intervention to the things which we can understand, and to suppose that He has no ways of communicating thoughts, impulses, and decisions to His children except those ways which the senses can discern and ordinary intelligence define. He can touch the heart and shape the thoughts, and influence the will, through a thousand secret channels. He can fill the inner chambers with light which the outward eyes are too dull to see. He can awaken a slumbering conscience into activity, and quicken its dead sensitiveness into life. He can speak to us a language which we feel, but cannot hear and interpret. He can bring His spirit into contact with ours so wonderfully that we are not conscious of it at the time, and only know of it afterwards because it has determined us to the right course. And every one who has prayed much knows that many a time the clouds on his path have been lifted, his moral difficulties have been settled for him, and he has seen as clearly what he ought to do as if some visible pillar of fire were leading him along that very path. Nay, there is no doubt that men who do constantly and habitually ask for God's light, enjoy it. They come to know by a sort of spiritual instinct what the will of God is. They recognise the face of duty in the dark, just as the keen eyes of love will discern the face of a friend, however much disguised, and though they sometimes blunder and often err, they never go far wrong, and they only stumble a moment to tread more firmly again. There is enough of God's light on the path given to those who daily seek it.

Further, if this prayer is to be of any value, we

must be prepared to go in God's way when He shows it. "Teach me Thy way; I will walk in Thy truth; unite my heart to fear Thy name." Because if the heart is not united, if one part is looking towards God's light and the other pulling away from it strongly to what one likes a great deal better, there is nothing but confusion, indecision, cross purposes, and the guidance is given in vain, even if in that case it is given at all. For we never get light unless we ask for it with the whole heart and are resolved to walk in it if it can be shown us. Suppose you say, "Give me light, but not too much; do not give me so much light that I shall have to change my mind on certain questions on which I am fixed, and give up certain things which I am determined to hold. Do not let the light be too full and clear." If you pray in that way—and many do half unconsciously pray in that way—you will get no light at all. God does not give His Spirit by measure in that fashion, withholding all except the little bit that suits you. If you ask for His guidance, you must leave Him to determine how much, and with united heart you must say, "Teach me Thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in Thy truth." We are to pray that He will show us the way and not necessarily the end; the way, and not what it will lead to. God takes care of that, and we can safely leave it with Him. What ought we to do? That is the question; it is the only question about which we should seriously concern ourselves. Not what will be the consequences of doing it; what shall we gain or lose by it. The moment you begin to ask that, you have got the divided heart, and the divided heart will hide God's light, and in all probability lead you in the wrong direction. We want to know God's way, and we do

not want to walk in our own way and call it God's; and we are willing to walk in that way when it is clearly pointed out to us even though it means sacrifice, temporary loss, perhaps loss of popularity, or of friends, or something else. No matter, so it be God's way, we will take it.

That is what the prayer means. It is an empty form, nay it is almost a mockery, if you offer it in any other spirit, and with any other intention. But the prayer will always bring enough of God's light to one who speaks it with that mind.

XXIV

JEREMIAH

REVERENCE FOR THE OLD THINGS

Jer. vi. 16 : "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

JEREMIAH was the most unpopular of the prophets. None of them were greatly loved; they were too outspoken. But this man came in for more odium than the rest. First because he was somewhat of a pessimist, uttering predictions which the events proved true enough, but which were painted in too gloomy colours to suit the tastes of the people. Secondly, because he never flattered. The sins of the times were so glaring and universal that they needed a stern censor, and Jeremiah denounced them with unsparing vehemence and most disagreeable honesty. And a third, and even greater, reason for the dislike was that they regarded him as old fashioned, out of date, an antiquated, obsolete old fogey, with his eyes behind. He was always harping on the old times when people lived simple lives, and feared God, and kept the commandments, and always lamenting the foreign ways and foreign sins which had come into fashion. And the people sneered at him as a sort of fossil, as a man who had been born a century too late. For there was a rage for new lights, new ideas, new fashions, new moralities, and new religions. The people had a disease upon them which might be

called Egyptomania. They wanted to form a close alliance with Egypt, and to adopt all their modes of life, their dress, furniture, luxuries, self-indulgences, political ideas, military system, laws, morals, and religion. There was to be a clean sweep made of all that Israel had loved and believed in, and by taking heathen Egypt as a model they would speedily attain to Egypt's greatness and splendour. This was the craze against which the prophet set himself and protested in vain. For there are times when a people are determined to destroy themselves. They were weary of everything old—Moses, David, and even God; and Jeremiah shouted to regardless ears that it would be their ruin, that their true salvation was in holding on to the faith and morals which had made their fathers great. "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways and see and ask for the old paths, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." And now, what shall we say of these words? Are the old paths always divine, and the new ways always as dangerous as this prophet thought them? That is not a question which can be answered straight off with a simple "Yes," or "No." The answer has to be qualified, and there are more answers than one. The Bible does not always speak in the same voice about it. If Jeremiah looked back with lingering affection, St. Paul, who had seen the higher truth in Christ, had his eyes in front, and advised us to forget the things which are behind. St. Paul again said, "Prove all things, and hold fast that which is good." And a greater than Paul has told us that every wise man will bring out of his treasury things new and old. The man who sneers at everything which is old, and fancies that wisdom always wears a brand new face, has precious little of the latter article himself. The

alphabet and the simple rules of arithmetic are as ancient as an Egyptian mummy, but they are not out of date yet, and are not likely to be put on one side until the world turns fool from its over cleverness. We still need some of the things which Noah and Abraham prized. On the other hand, the man who sets his face against everything new is shutting his eyes to the light, denying the movements of the Spirit of God, crippling his mind and heart at every turn, and indeed is only fit for a museum or a coffin. Wisdom, reverence, goodness, and safety are found in neither extreme, but in a happy medium between the two.

I

To bind ourselves to the old paths is, for us at least, in many things impossible. We live in the midst of rapid movement and change, and we are carried along by it in spite of ourselves. And if we could do it, it would be paralysing. It would be the end of all healthy life and action. It would be intellectual and moral suicide. It is the distinguishing feature of Christian nations to be for ever casting off the old and putting on the new. Where Christian faith is there is always a forward movement, a divine energy which is continually bringing to birth new and better things. It is a dead religion which stands still and makes men stand still. The spirit of life in Christ Jesus urges the world on, away from a dead past nearer to the golden age which is to be. Terrible is the stagnation and motionless corruption of those Eastern nations which have never felt the quickening pulses of our faith. I hardly dare bring before you the things which are going on in China.¹ We are all

¹ The Boxer Risings.

holding our breath in the anguish of suspense, waiting for the horrors which will be presently unfolded. Madness, lust, devilry, and murder without forethought and without mercy, turning earth into a very hell ; and further on rivers of blood before this awful storm of passion can be quelled ! And it all comes from a blind, brutal, obstinate clinging to the old paths. The world moves on, and the Chinese refuse to move. They say to the spirit of the age, "Let us alone ; why art thou come to torment us ?" They want to fasten themselves down where their fathers stood two thousand years ago. They believe that perfection was reached then ; that their ancestors were as gods, knowing all wisdom and goodness ; that nothing can be added to what was discovered all that long time ago. Their ignorance is as profound as the ocean, and their self-conceit as high as heaven itself. They are ready to fight to the death against every new thought and way, fighting against the light, fighting against destiny, and sinking further and further into moral filth and degradation, from which Christ only can deliver them. God in His mercy has brought us out of all that, and given us eyes to see that through the ages one unceasing purpose runs and the minds of men are widened with the process of the suns. There are a hundred things in nearly every department of life which we do and know and understand better than our fathers. And we should never dream of going back in science, machinery, politics, government, freedom of thought and speech, or in religion. Some of the clergy have their eyes behind, and would like to replace our Protestant faith with the purblind, diseased, and soul-corrupting superstitions of the fifteenth century. They might as well ask us to exchange our railways for the mule tracks and pillions

of the middle ages. We know God better, and the mind of Christ better than they did of old. We have reached a fuller truth, a clearer light, and a nobler charity, and to ask for the old paths would be—putting on again the chains from which God's delivering mercy and the expanding light have set us free. That is one side of the question. And yet—

II

To forsake all the old paths is a folly quite as blind and self-destructive as to cling to them all. Wisdom was not born in the present century. It dwelt with God before the foundation of the world, and He gave some of it to men who lived thousands of years before our time. We are cleverer than the ancients in some things, but not in all. In science and machinery and the art of living comfortably we are far ahead of them, but in certain other things we are almost as far behind. The Greek thinkers were superior to the best thinkers of to-day. We could not now produce such books as Plato wrote, and the Hebrew prophets and psalmists put all our cleverest writers into the shade. We cannot build temples as the men of old built. We cannot paint pictures, or carve statues, or create things of beauty as they did. In works of poetry and imagination we have to confess ourselves utterly beaten. We have no Homers, and Virgils, Dantes, Miltos, Shakespeares, Bunyans. We have no great musical composers. Modern literature is but washy stuff compared with the best that men thought and wrote when the world was younger. And if all our wisest heads were put together they could not compose, even from a literary point of view, any one of the nobler books

and chapters of the Bible. Nay more, when men tell us that these old prophets and apostles were deceived when they professed to see visions and hear divine voices, when we are told that these things could not be because there are no such things now, I answer at once, these men had keener visions and a more richly developed spiritual nature than we have, and they saw things which we cannot see because they lived so much nearer to God. In moral and religious things many of those greatest men were far in advance of our best, and we can only reach some of their excellence by learning of them and treading in the old paths. In fact, in the greatest things of life the old ways are the everlasting ways, and the only ways of safety. They have stood the test of time, and borne the wear of centuries, and survived the wreckage of millenniums, and we go back to them for ever and for ever again as to things which are very old and yet always new. At least, we do unless we are hardened by scepticism and blinded by self-conceit. For the momentous questions of morality and righteousness, worship and reverence, sin and human need, God and immortality, spiritual mysteries and things unseen we have still to sit like children at the feet of those giants of faith, those great souls from Moses to St. Paul, who walked with God and spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. There are certain old ways as good now as they were two or three thousand years ago, and just as far above our age as they were above the age in which they were given. We cannot dispense with the Ten Commandments yet. They fall below the Gospel standard, but they still shoot above our conduct; and it will be time to improve upon them when we have learnt to keep them. We cannot find in all the

other books a simpler and more beautiful summing up of religion than this which an old prophet wrote: "To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly before thy God." And as for the Sermon on the Mount, its very perfection is our despair. It is as far above the best common morality of the day as the heavens are above the earth. If you want to find the highest types of manhood, you will stand rather in the old paths than the new; you will look back rather than around you. It would be difficult to find in the modern world faith and heroism greater than Abraham's, patience and forbearance equal to Moses', integrity and fearlessness superior to Daniel's, or a perfect gentleman at all points like Paul. Ah! and the Man Christ Jesus, the God Man, and the incarnation of heaven's loveliness, is so much higher than modern life can show that even to compare Him with others is an irreverence. He stands out like some great mountain, white with spotless snow, making the best of other men seem but as dust mounds with only a touch of His glory; so high above the very saints that those who get nearest to Him still follow with feelings of half despair very far off.

If we want to know what sin is, we must go to the Bible and the cross of Jesus Christ, and not to the modern ideas, which often make light of sin and treat it as irresponsible disease. If we want to learn the depth of penitence we must go to the soul-stricken David or the weeping Peter. If we would be taught to pray we must get our lessons from Abraham, Elijah, St. Paul, and, above all, from Him who wrestled in the garden. If we would know the grandeur and the sweetness of forgiveness we must stand in that old garden where One hung upon a cross nearly two thousand years ago. And if we

would see light beyond the grave we must go all that way back and stand with the women and the disciples before an open sepulchre.

Yes, and perhaps above all things, if we would learn how to live and love, to endure and to hope, to suffer and to die, it is only in the old Bible paths that we can get the lesson. The new lights will show us how to get money faster, and to make life smoother and more comfortable, but they will not help us to be brave in difficulties, patient in cross-bearing, and fearless in the hour of death. No; we can only find light and strength for these things in the ways that certain sacred feet trod all those centuries ago. There only is the dark face of sorrow illumined and the deepest problems of life solved and the eternal questions answered, answered by Him who is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. Ask then for the old paths and walk therein. So shall ye find rest unto your souls.

XXV

JEHOIAKIM

A FOOL AND HIS PENKNIFE

Jer. xxxvi. 23 : "And it came to pass, that when Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the roll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth."

THERE is an old saying that a child and a fool should never be trusted with a penknife, for each of them will employ it either in whittling away things of value or in injuring themselves. This particular penknife had got into the hands of an exceptionally foolish king, and he used it according to his folly. He was a poor, weak-brained, besotted simpleton, whom his flatterers and courtiers had persuaded to regard himself as a Solomon. A man steeped in vice, a coward and a braggart, with a vast stock of obstinacy and bravado, and a huge opinion of himself, but without a spark of real courage and manliness. He was committing one political blunder after another, leading the nation swiftly to destruction, and dragging it down with himself to the lowest stage of godlessness and immorality. He was like one sailing gaily towards a cataract, with the rapids all about him, and the final plunge not far off.

Jeremiah, the only honest and clear-sighted statesman in the land, as well as God's prophet, knew that the catastrophe was coming, that the king was going to lose his crown, and the country its independence;

that all things were hastening to a general clash and ruin unless they speedily mended their ways; and that the king and his flatterers were living, as such gentry do, in a fools' paradise. Jeremiah saw it with the seer's illumined eyes. It came to him as the word of the Lord, and as the word of the Lord he wrote it down on a roll of parchment. The roll was brought to the king, as he sat enthroned in one of his palaces, with his courtly parasites and sycophants around him. One of them read it to him, through three or four pages; and it was not pleasant reading. It contained no flattery. It was a black picture of the king's misdoings, and the terrible consequences which some near morrow would bring. The royal sinner did not like it. What sinner does, whether he be king or beggar? He did not want to think about to-morrow. No man on the high way to destruction does. He suddenly stopped the reading, and said, "Pass the roll to me." And then to prove how brave he was, and how little he cared for either prophet or God, he took his penknife, cut the roll in pieces, flung them into the fire that was burning on the hearth, watched them until they were reduced to white ashes, and said, "There, that is the end of the business!" Yes, it was the end of that particular roll, but it did not get rid of the awkward truths which the roll contained, for they could all be written again, and were, and, what was more, they all came to pass none the less because the writing of them had been consigned to the flames. When the Bible was first printed in England, the Romish bishops and priests played Jehoiakim's game. They bought up every copy they could find, and made bonfires of them. The printers used the money to provide ten presses where there had been one, and

the Bibles in the land increased fifty-fold until the priests found that the bonfire game did not pay. You may cut away God's word, or burn it, or trample it under your feet, but still you have to reckon with God, and the word remains and it gets fulfilled whether you like it or not.

I

Now that picture of the king with the penknife is often repeated in various ways. The Bible has been so often attacked by that instrument that if it were not the indestructible word and work of God it would long since have disappeared. People have always been so busy cutting out what they did not believe, or what they did not like, that really it is only by a perpetual miracle that there is any of it left. In our own times, what is called the Higher Criticism has disposed of the greater part of it, and only left us a few stray leaves. This part, they say, is an interpolation : out with it ; and this is an eastern myth : throw it away ; and this is opposed to science or history : cut it out ; this contradicts some other part : use the penknife ; this is a bit of faulty human work : cast it forth ; this is imperfect from a moral point of view, and this is in bad taste : let it go. They are only pruning, and correcting, and improving, they say ; but to some of us it seems like lopping off every limb and bleeding the thing to death, and if we submit to this action of the penknife we shall presently have nothing but the binding of the book left, with an inscription on it, "Ichabod, the glory is departed." I thank God that I have still my Bible, and believe in it in spite of all the cutting and paring down that has been done. Somehow it stands the

fire and comes out unharmed, no matter what furnace you pass it through. Critics have their day, and Jehoiakims do their fooling and die, but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

II

But do not let me send you away with the comfortable assurance that these are the only people who use the penknife. I am afraid we all keep that instrument for special occasions, and use it when we do not wish to face an inconvenient or unwelcome truth. Men who profess the greatest reverence for the Bible, and swear generally by all that it contains, sometimes manage to put out parts which do not harmonise with their conduct and views. There is that High Churchman, that seraphic young ritualist in surplice, with the mark of the Bishop's ordaining hand still fresh on his head, he warns you against all unauthorised teachers, is shocked at the audacity which dares to meddle with sacred things without Episcopal sanction, and sweetly prays that presumptuous intruders like your minister may not incur the fate of Korah and Abiram. I open the Bible and read to this brother: "Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His spirit in them all." I read again: "Some preach Christ of contention, and some of envy and strife. What then? Notwithstanding, Christ is preached, and therein do I rejoice; yea, and will rejoice." He stops me and says, "But that is not High Church teaching, that is not in my prayer-book; cut it out!" There are our good friends who admire, honour, revere, and

love Christ as the highest man, but stop short of worshipping Him as divine. It must surely be a difficult thing for them to read the New Testament without the penknife. I turn to such words as these : "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things were made by Him." I read again, "All things were created by Him that are in heaven and that are in earth, and He is before all things, and by Him all things consist, and He is the head of the Church." I can only get rid of the deity of Christ by using the penknife freely here. And I meet my own Baptist brethren of the stricter sort, who will not sit down at the Communion Table with those who have not been properly baptized. I venture to read to them from the great Apostle : "I thank God that I baptized none of you but Crispus and Gaius, yes, and the household of Stephanas, which I had almost forgotten, and besides, I know not whether I baptized any other"; and evidently he did not much care. And my friends say in their heart, "Yes; Paul was great on Calvinistic doctrine, but he had somewhat loose views on the Communion question. Cut it out!" And there are my dear Pædobaptist friends, when they bring their infants to the font. Well, it is hardly the penknife which they use; it is rather the gum-bottle and a little imagination, and they paste in a few additional texts to get the sanction they require.

III

I fear we are all sinners, either with penknife or the paste. We often cut out moral precepts and commandments if they do not quite accord with our

conduct. Most of us use the knife on those many words of Jesus and His Apostles which warn us against Mammon worship and covetousness and the love of money, and tell us not to pay all our devotions to the people who have it. It makes our conscience easier if we can somehow get these texts put out. They are so uncompromising and so drastic.

Some people do not always like the Fifth Commandment and kindred injunctions which speak to us about honouring father and mother and reverencing the hoary head. "That is quite antiquated prejudice, and out of date," they say; "let the penknife deal with it." There are people who talk far too freely, and not always too truthfully, discussing the faults of friends, and passing on mischievous scandal. I read them what Jesus said: "For every idle word you shall give account." "Oh! is that there?" they say. "I do not believe it; lend me a penknife." And there is a strong-minded Christian woman, who rules her household and her husband in the fear of God, but she does rule unmistakably. I refer her to the words of Paul: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands." "That is preposterous!" she says. "Paul knew nothing about these domestic matters. Out with it!" And in this case, indeed, if her husband is either weak-minded or unreasonable, I sympathise with her, and am prepared to lend her a penknife for the occasion. I think the best "man" should rule, to whatever sex he or she belongs. And there are Christian people who find it desperately hard to forgive; it is as hard to get a camel through the eye of a needle. They will keep a grudge and maintain a silent quarrel with a fellow-Christian for years. I open the book for them and read: "If thy brother offend thee seventy times, and seventy

times repent, thou shalt forgive him. If thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gifts before the altar, and go and be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Be ye kind, tender hearted, forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any." And they stop me and say, "These things are not in my Bible; I have cut them all out." And there are all those sayings of the Master and His Apostles about cheerfulness, gladness, thankfulness—"Be of good cheer; in all things give thanks; be content with such things as ye have; rejoice always, and again I say rejoice." They are the brightest and pleasantest sunshine in the Bible; but some of us use the penknife on them every day. We should all be better Christians if we could just take the Book as it is, and not be always forgetting or putting out the parts we least like.

But let me not forget to say that the penknife is used far more constantly, and more in Jehoiakim's fashion, by those who are not Christians at all, by those who are living wholly irreligious lives, pushing God away from them, and doing things openly or in secret which are contrary to all that He has said. Like that foolish king, they treat the solemn words which are written against them and their doings with derision, contempt, and perhaps bravado. Away with all the warnings, threatenings, counsels, and invitations which stand in the way of our desires. "The soul that sinneth it shall die." "The wages of sin is death." "For all these things God will surely bring thee into judgment." "Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." "God is not mocked." "He that believeth not, is condemned already." "He that despiseth Me despises Him that hath sent Me." "Whosoever is ashamed of Me and

of My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed in that day." "Oh!" says the sinner, "all these big words mean nothing; they are bogies to frighten children. Cut them away!" God's long-suffering is abused and misunderstood. He is so patient that men think He will never come to judgment at all. The threatenings are so long in fulfilling themselves that the careless heart scorns them. The penalties of sin are so slow in coming that every sinner hopes to escape them. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." It is the old story of the penknife. Cut away the roll; burn it; let us forget the words; out of mind is out of existence; the day of reckoning will never come. But it does come, nevertheless! The inevitable hour creeps on; the debt stands though you tear the bill in two and burn both halves. You cannot burn God's ledger in which all the accounts are kept. You will have to pay that bill unless, through faith and repentance and the merits of Jesus, it is all forgiven.

I pray God that He will save us all from that short-sighted and stupid penknife work. May it be our earnest purpose to know and obey every dear, true word of God. For in the keeping of all His commandments is a great reward.

XXVI

MICAH

A PROPHET'S PESSIMISM

Micah vii. 5 : " Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide ; keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom. Therefore, I will look for the Lord ; I will wait for the God of my salvation."

IT must have been ill living in the Jerusalem which Micah knew if the report which he gives of it was unvarnished truth. Daniel in the den of lions was not nearly so badly off as Micah in this den of thieves if the picture drawn here is not overdone. The good man was perished from the earth. There was not one upright person to be found. Princes and judges were selling justice for bribes. Great and low were steeped, dyed, and corrupted in the same iniquity. There was not one that had the fear of God before his eyes ; not one that would not lie, betray, and deceive. And the prophet sums it all up with this grim warning : " Trust no one but God. Beware of your dearest friend. Keep your secrets from the wife of your bosom. Be suspicious of your very son and daughter, and regard as possible traitors and enemies every one who dwells in your house." It is a terrible indictment ! It makes us shudder. But surely there was too much gall in the pen which wrote this, and too much bitterness in the heart which dictated it. The prophet was in a black mood. All these Hebrew prophets had their melancholy hours. The general habit of their mind was cheery, buoyant,

magnificently hopeful. But as with all other good men, they had distressing fits of gloom. They dropped down from the sunlit mountains to the deep abysses, with pitchy darkness all about them, and dead men's bones and the very vapours of hell. These attacks never lasted long. They never do with good men. They soon got out of the grip of Giant Despair, into the light and love of God again. But while the fits lasted they exaggerated all the evil that was about them, and overlooked the better things, as we are apt to do in those moods. And some of the words which they penned on these sickly and dismal days are not to be read by us as sweet Gospel truth. We have to make allowances for the soul distress through which they were passing, and interpret them in the happier light of Christian thought and hope. We need particularly to read in that way the words which I have given you. "Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide; keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom." Terrible words these if we had to live by them; if we felt that every face we look on was a fair-seeming mask, covering a false, treacherous heart; if we believed that there was lying hypocrisy in the dulcet tones of every voice that whispered kind things in our ears; and if we looked upon all men as hiding a poisonous sting in their velvet-gloved hand. If things had come to that pass, I should want to get into a nunnery, or even seek a quieter asylum in the grave. For indeed, life would not be worth living on those terms, and death would be the happiest way out of it. The prophet must have been badly hit and sorely wounded before he could write in this way. Depend upon it he had been stabbed in the dark by hands that he leaned upon, and betrayed

by the Judas kisses of lips that he loved. And when this happens, and the heart is bleeding from the sense of bitter wrong, you can forgive a man, however wild and fierce his words may be. Most of us at one time or another catch a bit of that savage humour, and are tempted to fling out at our fellow-men and say, as the Psalmist said in his haste, they are all liars. There are times when the ground under our feet becomes like shifting sand or soft morass when we thought it rock, and the men we could have staked our lives upon betray us with a smile. For though there is a great deal of fidelity among men, there is also a great deal of loose attachments and unfaithfulness. There are few of us who have not suffered a little, and some have suffered much, from the fickleness, inconsistency, or deliberate falseness of those in whom they placed implicit trust. We thought they loved us, we believed that they were pledged to us in unswerving fidelity, we were ready to confide to them our secrets and our very honour, we were sure that in our time of need we could fall back on their staunch support and loyalty. And lo ! when the time of trial came we found that their nature was light and frivolous and changeable, that their affections had no deep root and could be easily transferred to any new fancy, or that their hearts were false and their professions a sleek hypocrisy, and that they only held to us so long as it profited them, and then sold our secrets, stabbed our trust, and flung away our love as if it had been so much mud. It is in such hours—and few of us altogether escape such hours—that we incline to the mood of this prophet, and indict fierce things, not only against those who have wronged us, but against humanity at large. We look round with sad and weary eyes, and say, “Trust no one, not even

your brother, or the man with whom you have prayed for years." And that, indeed, makes the betrayal of a trust almost the wickedest thing that can be done upon this earth. It were almost less cruel to rob a man of all his goods than to deceive him miserably when he has believed in you thoroughly. Especially if he has looked upon you as a Christian and a good man, and finds that you have imposed upon him. That kills the faith of a man. It sours his heart against all good things and God. There are fifty times more unbelievers and atheists made in this way than by all the sceptical books that were ever written. Be true to your professions and loyal to your friends and faithful to your pledges if you would not be guilty of soul murder. For it is infidelity in these things that kills the very soul in men, and makes them hard and heartless cynics, believing in nothing, because your treachery has killed their belief in you.

Well, we have all such moods, just for an hour or a day, but they never continue long with men who have some of the sweet reasonableness of Christ. We say in our hearts, "All men are liars," but we speedily repent and confess with the Psalmist, "I was a beast before Thee when I spoke and thought in that way." We remember that Christ trusted eleven of His Disciples still though He had found one of them shamefully false. Nay, that He still believed more or less in all men, though they had loaded Him with ingratitude and in their madness crucified Him. It is good to remember that in every angry and suspicious hour. Moreover, we carry our thoughts back through the light of other days. We think of all the men and women who have been true to us, true as gold, and hold fast as death. We think of the mother who clung to us with immeasurable affection, and the wife

who has kept every one of her plighted vows, and loved us far better than we deserve. We think of the friends who have stuck to us as close as any brother, and, through evil and good reports, shown us the same dear sympathetic face. We think of the men and women with whom we have prayed and worshipped, and with whom we have had unbroken communion without a jar through long sweet years, and then the darkness of the soul is richly illumined. We get into a generous, healthy mind again, the mind which becomes a Christian, and from which we should never swerve. For not to believe in the men about us is to carry a sort of hell within us. Not to believe in the goodness of good men and the loyalty of those who speak sweet words is to have one's whole nature twisted, warped, and soured. Though fifty men deceive me, I will still believe that the thousand are true. What is life worth if you cannot trust the hand which presses yours with warmth, and the eyes which look straight into yours with the light of honest affection, and the lips that kiss you with a tender fire that death only can chill? It is those things that make the wealth of life and joy of life. Without them we should be poor and destitute, and without them we should have hardly any faith left in heaven or God. Give me the charity which believeth all things and hopeth all things, and not the black thoughts which say, "Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide." And now let me advise you whenever these spells of gloom are upon you to do precisely what the prophet did—get into touch with God again. When man fails you, turn to Him who cannot fail. "Therefore I will look for the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation." Precisely; that was just the wisest and happiest thing he could

do. He knew where he could find sweetening for a soured heart, and we never fail to find honey for our bitterness there. When you have lost your faith in man, renew your faith in God, and then most surely your faith in man will come back to you. The two things are wedded inseparably ; they live and increase, weaken and die together. Trust in God and you will always be driven to the sweet necessity of trusting your fellow-men. You cannot help feeling that some of the goodness which is in Him gets into them also. When I kneel before Him with a true, honest heart, how can I help believing that hundreds of others are bowing before Him with the same sincerity, and swayed by the same uplifting emotions ? To believe in God is to believe in all godly souls, and to believe that they are so many as to be past count. When I realise most the presence of God in the sanctuary, and am burning with the kindling of His love, then do I know beyond doubt that the souls around me are touched with the same fire, alive with the same holy aspirations. I believe in them, too, with all my heart. I want to clasp them in dear friendship. They are true as I am true. My faith in God creates the human trust and the human love. It is the man who has lost God who loses also the other thing. It is the unbeliever who becomes a cynic. It is the atheist who hardens his heart against his brother. When heaven is blotted out, one's earth becomes darkened. If you never look up to God's face you are soon persuaded that there is a false mask on every human face. The man who never prays, and who does not believe in the infinite goodness, finds it very hard to believe that there is real goodness anywhere. It is he who tells you that all saints are hypocrites and all Christians hollow, and all the churches as

corrupt and worldly as the world. You never hear that sort of talk from men who walk with God. It always comes from the lips of those who begin by putting Him out of their lives, and often end in utter disbelief of everything that is sweet and lovely. Just listen to this thing which I cut out of a society journal yesterday :—

“Life is all vanity ;
Love, an inanity ;
Hate, but insanity—
 Greet and pass on.
Life only lasts an hour ;
Hopes, but an April shower ;
Dreams are its richest dower—
 Good night ! 'tis gone.”

There is a great deal of rubbish of that sort going round, which, when you meet it, you had better consign to the gutter, as you would any other refuse. It is just what the dreary old preacher of Ecclesiastes said two or three thousand years ago, only that he said it a great deal more cleverly. And we can forgive him, for the light of the world had not then dawned, and Christ had not come to set humanity singing its song of hope. But such stuff now is the mere rot and garbage of a diseased and unbelieving society. “Life is all vanity, love an inanity, hope but an April shower.” Well it may be, and doubtless is, all that to the minds that see no God and no lasting good in anything. But we have not so learned of Christ. For us there are always the sweet trust, the hallowed communion, the undying affection, the uplifted looks, the imperishable friendships, and the immortal hopes of the sons of God. We have faith in all things, because we have faith in Him.

And yet forget not this one true thought which was in the prophet's mind—that every other trust

does fail unless our first and deepest trust is in Him. There is nothing which we can depend upon unless we have Him always in the background and in our deepest heart to run to and to cling to in the dark and lonely hour. For we know that the dearest friend may possibly—though it is a hideous possibility, not to be entertained—turn away from us, and we know assuredly that the friend who is true as God may be severed from us by distance, change, or death. We know that human love without the life beyond is but the rapture of a day. We know that wealth and wisdom, favour and ambition are broken reeds to lean upon when the days of stress and storm come. We know that heart and flesh must fail soon or late, and then it is terrible if God be not the strength of our life and our portion for ever. There is but one thing which is as everlasting rock under our feet. It is the faithfulness of God, the steadfastness of His promises, the absolute changelessness of His affection, the inexhaustibility of His pity and forgiveness. They that trust in the Lord shall never be ashamed, world without end. Be sure that your feet are on that rock. “Therefore I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation.”

XXVII

MICAH

AN OLD PICTURE OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Micah vii. 18-19 : "Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy. He will subdue our iniquities : and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

WE preach sermons at times which only touch certain people—the anxious, or the sorrowful, or the doubting, or the unconverted and hardened, or the young and beginners in the Christian life, or those of rich and ripe experience. We are almost compelled to do this because the truth has so many sides, and there are so many moods and minds to provide for. Yet the best sermon is always that which gets in a message for every mood and speaks to every heart. And it would hardly be possible to preach from the text which I have chosen without doing that. I hear the preacher announce this text, and immediately I know that whoever and whatever I may be he has something to say to me, and to every one about me. It may be the dullest and stupidest sermon of its kind, but it can hardly fail to find me out at some point. Speak of sin, iniquity, transgression, and forgiveness, and you spread a net so wide and all-embracing that no one can escape from it: no man or woman, youth, maiden, or child. The worst and the best, the saint and the scapegrace are brought together here. There is one thing which we all need, if we only knew it,

as much as we need food and air. We all need forgiveness—forgiveness from our fellow-men, and still more forgiveness from our God. We are continually doing and saying things, even to our nearest friends, blundering, thoughtless, cruel things, which call for their forbearance and pardon; and how many more things we do and say which the Almighty has to bear with and pardon, only He Himself knows. The judge in Shylock's case appealed to that hard man to forgive his debtor on the ground that we all do pray for mercy, on the ground that we all sorely need it. There can be no question about that. The strange thing is that when we need it so much, and never come to the sanctuary or kneel in prayer without asking for it, we are so slow and reluctant to show it and to give it to others. For that, alas! is the besetting sin with most of us—we are so unwilling to forgive. Now it may possibly help us to look at this picture of God's forgiveness, the picture which this old prophet draws for us, and I know no other representation of divine forgiveness, even in the Bible, which exceeds this in loveliness and tender sweetness. We are told here not only that God forgives, but how He forgives, and that is even more important. I had rather not be forgiven by some men, they do it in such a brusque and awkward way. Their forgiveness stings more than their wrath. It is the manner of God's forgiveness that makes the charm of it. He forgives in such a royal, complete, and generous way that it is a positive luxury to be forgiven by Him.

I

And first we read that He passeth over the transgressions of His people. We ought to understand

what that passing over means, for we have had constant experience of it in actual life, and have benefited by it times without number. Your wife has a great many things to pass by, your husband possibly a few. If they chronicled and remembered every word and action which hurt them, your domestic life would be one perpetual jar. Your mother sees a great many things which she pretends not to see. If she put down in a book everything that grieves her, it would keep her fairly well employed. Your best friend would soon have a long catalogue of grievances if he kept a record of every ungenerous word and faulty temper. Happily they who love us best pass over these things, and forget them. Every wise schoolmaster has a blind eye. So long as his boys on the whole are going straight, he turns his blind eye on the minor follies and offences. And it is good for all of us to have that charitable blind eye, and to pray that our friends may have it. For life would be hardly worth living if we were always seeing the motes in each other's eyes and making beams of them. There are some men and women who pass nothing by. They fasten suspiciously on every doubtful thing you do. They catch at every doubtful word. They not only see everything, but imagine a great many things which they do not see. We may be too sharp sighted. I hate to be with people who are keen to detect every failing and disposed to magnify every foible into a crime. There is no love or friendship on earth which can continue long unless it looks on many things with the blind eye, and learns to pass over the innumerable trifles which are not worth remembering.

Our God is great at passing over, just as Jesus was great in that same way. His Disciples grieved

Him a hundred times a day by their stupid blunders, envyings, and vanities. But He did not show the grief He felt, save on rare occasions. He passed ninety and nine things by; and that is Godlike. "If Thou wert strict to mark iniquity," says the Psalmist, "who could stand?" We should not stand; we should almost shrivel up in that case. I used to think of God as One who was far keener in watching sin than in observing right things. I used to be told that the least sin made Him angry, and that all sins, great and small, were carefully recorded in His book of remembrances. I do not believe that now. He sees all the ill that is in us; nothing escapes Him. But He is not strict to mark and fasten upon every error and every crooked thing in the lives of those who, on the whole, are trying to do His will. He is far quicker to discern the good than to fix His eyes upon the evil. He has far greater delight in looking on faith's honest endeavours than on faith's failures and weaknesses. And He keeps the most complete and careful reckoning, not of our irregularities, but of our repentance and prayers and longing for a better life. His eye seeth every precious thing. He makes most of the things which He approves; and the other things He sees but never magnifies, and is always ready to forgive and forget when there is the least true repentance. "He passeth over the transgressions of His heritage."

II

We read here that His forgiveness is once for all complete and for ever. "He retaineth not His anger." When He has once put it from Him, He never calls it back. There is never any reaping up of the old

grievance; no unearthing of the things that are once buried. "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." It is just at that point that God's thoughts and ways are so much higher and kinder than our thoughts and ways. There is not much of that full, frank, thorough, and perpetual forgiveness among men; not much. We find it in mothers and wives, and sometimes in fathers and husbands. But there is not a great stock of it outside the family circle. I know even brothers who never honestly forgive each other; no, not even when they meet at their father's grave. The old grudge is there, and it never gets any less bitter. What goes by the name of forgiveness is a very hollow thing compared with God's. Men who have done us a real wrong are rarely admitted to our full trust and favour again. We retain our anger though we profess to have thrown it off. We try to bury the offence, perhaps we say it is buried, but we know where the bones are, and, like sextons, are glad to fetch them up again after many years. We promise to overlook the things, and regard them as past, done with, and forgotten. But it is hard work; our minds go back upon them. It is far easier to forget our own sins than the transgressions of another against us. Complete forgetfulness is a divine thing, and we have the human trick of continually remembering. Then how eagerly we insist upon full repentance and ample apologies. We rarely meet the offender half way, as the father of the prodigal did. We want him to come all the way, and acknowledge the whole thing, and be very humble, and then perhaps we may fall on his neck, or more likely give him a cold shake of the hand. That is man's forgiveness, and it is not Godlike. Moreover, there is rarely a great delight in forgiving. It is often wrung from reluctant lips. It is like having

the teeth drawn. Men forgive you, but it is after they have given you what they call "a bit of their mind," and it is a very nasty bit—the sourest bit which they had in pickle. They say, perhaps, "Yes, I will forgive you just this once, though you don't deserve it." It is like ramming forgiveness into a pistol and firing it off at you. It is done in such a way that you would rather be without their forgiveness than have it.

Now, God's forgiveness is just the blessed opposite of all that. He delighteth in mercy. He has a positive joy in forgiving. He waits for your repentance with a heart of longing. It is the moment in which He can have a long-deserved gratification. When the father in the parable forgave his returning son, he had more joy in kissing him than the son had in being kissed. He killed the fatted calf, not so much to make a feast for the prodigal as to express his own delight in showing mercy. So God forgives with a gladness greater than the gladness of the child that receives it. And once He has said to the child "We are reconciled," He retaineth His anger no longer. It is not a patched-up truce; it is a permanent peace and trust. He blots out the offence. He says, "It shall no more come into mind." There is no suspicion left. There was a young man who fell into dishonesty, robbed his employer, and got his sentence. He came out of prison, with character lost and all his chances, penitent and well-nigh heart-broken. His master took him back, and said, "I believe in the thoroughness of your repentance; you have my forgiveness, and you shall have my trust"; and he gave him a key of the cash box and safe. The man was overwhelmed. It was something to be forgiven; it was even more to be trusted as in the old times, and to have that shameful thing put away

as though it had never been. So God forgives, adding perfect trust to pardon. He treats us as if we had not betrayed Him once, and as if he knew that we should never betray Him again. "He retaineth not His anger." And never more does He make mention of the things which are put away. "Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." The prophet was thinking of the Mediterranean Sea, which has no tides. The dead and corrupt things which are thrown into the depths of that sea are never brought up again. The forgiven sins are done with so far as God is concerned. The memory of them may remain with us. But God never goes back upon them and charges us with them again. When Christ forgave Peter that awful fall and denial, He put the sin away completely. He never referred to it directly or indirectly. I should think that Peter would have been almost glad to have it out just once, just to say what a base wretch and coward he had been. But Christ gave him no opportunity; it was done with. And now that Disciple has been in the presence of His Master more than eighteen hundred years, and we know as surely as if it had been written down that never once in all that time has Christ made mention of the sin. Peter has thought about it, and talked about it to others no doubt. It is not likely that he will ever forget it. But the Master will never recall it. It was cast into the depths of the sea. Thus does God forgive. Happy are we if we have received His forgiveness. Happier still if we have learned at the Cross to forgive others as fully and truly as He forgives us.

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